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OR,

Silk Lasso Sam,

The Will-o'-the-Wisp of the Trails.

The Romance of Boys in Blue and Buck-skin, in Hangman's Gulch.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I. HER CHOICE.

My story opens with a scene in a Southern village, where stands a cozy little cottage embowered with flowers, and where dwells a poor artist, his ambitious wife and their only child, a beautiful girl of seventeen.

The artist sells just enough pictures at a small price to make for himself and family a comfortable living, yet he lives in hopes of some day making for himself a name and a fortune.

His wife is an ambitious woman, reared in luxury, and always with the regret in her heart that she married the poor artist whom she loved,

"THE CUT-THROATS OF THE MINES, AND BUFFALO BILL IS AT THEIR MERCY. HE NEEDS A FRIEND NOW AND I'LL BE THAT TO THE BRAVE SCOUT OR PERISH WITH HIM!"

Buffalo Bill on the War-path.

rather than one of the rich suitors whom her parents had selected for her to wed.

"Child of mine shall never make such a sad mistake in life," was the burden of her song, and her husband would sigh and say nothing.

Their daughter had been educated at one of the best of schools, was bright, beautiful, and accomplished, and her heart went out to her father rather than to her mother.

She had suitors by the score, and among them two who are to figure in the pages of this story.

One, Arden Leigh, was the son of a very wealthy planter, and a youth who had led a checkered career, for he had been partly educated abroad, where he engaged in a duel with a fellow student, the fatal termination of which had caused him to leave the University, so much was he to blame in the affair.

He had then gotten a cadetship in the navy of the United States, and been forced to leave the Academy on account of his cruel hazing of a brother middy.

His father had then sent him to a ranch he owned in Texas, and his killing a Mexican ranchero, whose sweetheart he insisted upon making love to, caused him to fly from the avenging hand of the friends of the dead man.

Then he returned home and settled down to a quiet life, until all felt that he had harvested his wild oats, and would yet become a good man, perhaps a great one, for in addition to his handsome face and splendid form, he was possessed of great intelligence, and had numerous accomplishments to be proud of.

Such was Arden Leigh at twenty-three, and he was half-heir with his sister to their father's large wealth.

The beauty of Kathleen Clyde, the artist's daughter, had at once won the admiration of Arden Leigh, and Mrs. Clyde was determined that her daughter should marry the young planter, who must come into so large a fortune by the death of his father, who was an invalid.

But Kathleen's heart was in another's keeping, one whose father had gone through with his estates, and had left to his wife and son an old plantation home, mortgaged above its value, and from which a bare living could be obtained.

Carrol Dean was the name of this youth, and a dashing, whole-souled fellow he was, working hard to keep the old home as long as his mother should live.

He loved Kathleen with all his heart, and both her father and herself owed their lives to the young man, for he had saved them from death by catching their runaway horse one day, when he was about to dash across the railroad, in front of an Express train.

Carleton Clyde therefore leaned toward Carrol Dean, as a husband for his daughter, while Mrs. Clyde had made up her mind that Kathleen should wed the rich planter's son, and with her to decide was to have her way.

One pleasant afternoon, as she was seated upon the piazza of her little home, Kathleen received two notes.

One was from Arden Leigh, and an avowal of his love, and begging her to become his wife at an early day, as his father's failing health caused him to decide to take a trip to Europe, and he wished to have his son and daughter accompany him, with her also as his son's wife.

The letter concluded by saying that the artist and his wife should move into the elegant plantation mansion and take charge the couple of years they were to be abroad, and it was written in a tone that admitted of no possibility of a refusal.

The letter of Carrol Dean asked her to pledge herself to one day become his wife, as he was going away for awhile to the far West, to see if he could sell out some interest his mother held in a mine there.

Both letters said that the writers would call that evening to know their fate.

And both came, by accident together, and Arden Leigh said haughtily:

"Kathleen, I have come for my answer, and I might as well let this young man know at once that he has no claim upon you, so that he will cease annoying you with his visits."

Then came the answer, slowly and distinctly uttered:

"The visits of Carrol Dean do not annoy me, Mr. Leigh, and as he, too, has come for his answer to his offer of his heart and hand to me, I will say now frankly that I prefer love in a cottage to unhappiness in a palace, and I shall wed the man I love," and she placed her hand in that of Carrol Dean.

"Never, by Heaven!" came in a savage tone from the lips of Arden Leigh, and following them a shot rang out and Carrol Dean dropped upon the piazza steps, while the assassin, with a little laugh, turned and strode away.

His horse was at the rack near the gate, and leaping into his saddle, he dashed off down the moonlit road like the wind.

CHAPTER II.

WESTWARD HO!

THE shot which Arden Leigh fired upon Carrol Dean was intended to kill.

Arden Leigh had hated Carrol Dean when they were boys at school together, looking down upon him because he was poor, though as far as family went, the Deans were of the best blood in the land.

Carrol's father was, unfortunately, fond of card-playing, and he had lost his fortune at the gaming-table, therefore being compelled to mortgage his property, and ending by taking his own life.

Carrol at school was always at the head of his class, and invariably took the prize from Arden Leigh, and this angered him greatly.

He also excelled him in riding at the tournaments, and in driving, and at last it was "the last straw that broke the camel's back," when one day he crowned Kathleen Clyde, a mere child then just entering her teens, Queen of Love and Beauty.

The result was that Arden Leigh spoke of Carrol as the son of a gambler and suicide, and the insult was at once resented, and the insulter severely thrashed.

This was prior to Arden Leigh's going broad to be educated, and when both were mere boys.

But Arden Leigh never forgot or forgave the whipping he received from Carrol Dean, and when Kathleen took her choice between the two, driven to madness at having his old rival win again in the game of love, and humble his pride, he drew his revolver, always too ready for use, and fired upon his foe.

The bullet cut into the right side of Carrol Dean, and when he was carried into the house by the artist, called to the spot by the shot and cries of Kathleen, it was thought that he could not live.

The doctor was sent for at once, and mounting her horse, Kathleen at once rode over to Gowan Brae, the home of the Deans, and broke the news as gently as she could to the invalid mother of the young man.

Mrs. Dean's courage did not forsake her, and she went at once to the Clyde cottage with Kathleen and for weeks hung over the bed upon which her wounded boy lay, hovering between life and death.

Kathleen also proved herself a most devoted nurse, and at last the crisis passed, and the physician said that the wounded man would live.

Planter Leigh and Ruth had at once driven over to the Clyde cottage, when it was known that Arden had shot Carrol Dean, and the sorrowing father told the doctor to send for other physicians for consultation, to employ a trained nurse and sent all bills to him.

But this act of kindness Mrs. Dean resented, and Artist Clyde said the wounded man was his guest, and he could care for him, while he at once offered a reward from his limited means for the capture of the fugitive, for believing that he had killed Carrol Dean, Arden Leigh had made his escape.

And then came the tidings to the father of the fugitive, that his son had hastened to the city, forged his name to a check, and had drawn from the bank ten thousand dollars in money, all that had been laid aside for the European trip.

Mr. Leigh, a heart-broken man, in wretched health, at once made his will, disinheriting his unworthy son, and with Ruth, his devoted daughter, set sail for Europe as soon as Carrol Dean was reported to be out of danger.

Hardly had Carrol Dean been pronounced across the danger line than his mother broke down under the strain, and the first day that the young man was able to go out to drive, it was to go to his mother's funeral.

Several weeks after the funeral Carrol Dean and Kathleen Clyde were quietly married at the artist's cottage home, Mrs. Clyde raising no objection, and seeming to have been subdued by all that had occurred.

It took half a year to settle up the Dean estate affairs, and then Carrol discovered that he had as his fortune only a few hundreds in money, and a few things that would bring him as much more when sold.

But the gold mine he held a claim for in the West, he had hopes of making a fortune out of, as reports had come of that part of the country having panned out paying quantities of the precious metal.

At last the doctor said a change would do Carrol Dean good, and that he would do well to go out on the frontier and rough it for awhile, especially as there were prospects of his doing well there.

So he left his loving wife and little baby boy, put a couple of hundred dollars in his pocket, and started for the far West.

It was with a sad heart that Kathleen saw him go, for she had found in a paper one day, an account of a bold robbery, of a stage coach, by a daring outlaw who was known as Silk Lasso Sam, and who was a handsome, courtly man, who had evidently been a gentleman until he had taken to the road as a highwayman.

Kathleen remembered that among the treasures brought from Texas by Arden Leigh, had been a beautiful silk lasso, and she had seen him, when visiting his sister Ruth, use it, with a skill that was marvelous.

As Arden Leigh had fled to the frontier, the young wife of Carrol Dean in some way connected him in her mind with the road-agent Silk Lasso Sam, and felt the greatest anxiety for her husband's safety as he was going to the vicinity which the paper had stated was the scene of the outlaw's robberies.

But Carrol Dean laughed at his wife's fears and started for the far West to find fortune or failure as the case might be.

CHAPTER III.

BUFFALO BILL IN DANGER.

IT was a balmy Sabbath Day in the mining country of Colorado, and the miners had knocked off work, as was the wont with most of them, for rest, enjoyment, a hunt, card-playing or carousing as the humor suited them.

A mile distant from one of the camps was situated a lonely cabin upon a mountain spur, and under the shelter of a cliff.

It was a pretty spot, with a spring trickling from the cliff, forming a pool of clearest water a few feet distant from the door, and with a grand view of mountain, valley and river spread out before it.

There was a winding path up to the cabin, down to a trail which led to the cluster of mining-camps down the valley, a pile of wood at the door ready for use, a freshly killed deer hanging on a tree near, with several hungry wolves crouching in a thicket sniffing the meat and gazing longingly at it.

Within, the log cabin was rudely furnished, with cot, table, a bench and some cooking-utensils, and without, seated by the door in an easy-chair made of hickory boughs and rope, sat the miner whose humble home the place was.

Bearded, and with long hair and coarse miner's attire of woolen hunting-shirt, pants, top-boots and slouch hat, one would hardly recognize in him the handsome young planter who had so nearly died at the hands of Arden Leigh three years before.

But it was Carrol Dean, known in the mines as Deadshot Dean, from the fact that he had been attacked in the camps one night soon after his coming by a crowd of desperadoes, and had shot the leader dead by a bullet sent into the very center of his forehead, and broken the right arm of four others, thus disarming them with five shots, in a fight of one against five.

With this adventure he had stamped his claim to the name of Deadshot Dean and won the respect of the better men of the community, and the fear of the bad element.

A handsome man he was as he sat there smoking his after-dinner pipe and with an open letter in his hand.

With a slight, but wiry form, about the medium height, well dressed for a miner, and with a face that was honest, fearless and full of determination, he looked just what he was, a true, manly man.

More or less luck had attended him since coming to the mines.

He had found the claim his father had bought from a retired miner, had struck it rich one day and held high hopes of a fortune, to discover the next day that the gold streak did not hold out.

But he had been enabled to send to the artist the full amount of his expenses incurred when he lay wounded in his home, and place to the credit of his wife and boy five hundred dollars for each.

Then poor luck had followed for months, with another streak of good fortune for a few days.

And so on it had gone with him, though he was slowly but surely getting ahead if fortune would only favor him.

With this end he had struggled for more than three years in his hard work, hoping for luck some day to "hit him big" as they called it in the mines.

And this letter from home, from his wife, told of her mother's death, and that she was now the housekeeper for her father who was most devoted to her, and his little grandson, who was named Clyde after his grandfather and whom the artist had also nick-named "Kit" after his pet name for Kathleen.

The letter thanked Carrol Dean for the last remittance of several hundred dollars, which the proud mother said she always equally divided with "Kit," after expenses were taken out, putting it away for a rainy day.

The miner had read the letter over and over again, and sighed that his loved ones were so far away and that perhaps years more might go by before he saw them.

Suddenly the sound of angry voices came to his ears and he saw a group of men coming down the trail, on the way to the settlement.

In their midst, and there were a score of them, was a man on horseback; his feet and hands were securely bound, while about his neck was a rope, the other end held by several men who were leading the way.

One glance at the man was sufficient to reveal to Carrol Dean that it was a man different by far from those who had him in their power, for he knew them as a wild and lawless band in the

mines—men who were ready for any deed of violence and rapine.

The horseman was a man of striking appearance in face, form and general make-up.

He rode a fine horse, long-bodied, clean-limbed and well equipped.

The rider was tall, graceful and sinewy in build, with massive shoulders, and looking just as he was, a giant in strength, quick in action as a panther and evidently one who possessed wonderful physical endurance.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings and hunting-shirt, top-boots and a broad-brimmed sombrero which was encircled by a silver cord and looped up upon the left side with a gold buffalo head, in which were set diamond eyes.

The face of the man was as handsome in feature as a woman's, his eyes dark and expressive, his mustache and imperial giving him a distinguished air and his long dark-brown hair fell in waving locks far below his shoulders.

Now he was bound hand and foot and looking like a captive lion, worried by a pack of yelping human wolves, for they were clamoring in noisy tones for his life, and when they reached Hangman's Gulch, half a mile below in the valley on the way to the settlement of the miners, that they would hang him was evident from their actions and speech.

"Ha! it is Buffalo Bill, the scout. The hill gang have got him and they intend to hang him—hang brave Buffalo Bill!" said the speaker seemed deeply moved.

"This must not be!" he at length cried, and he darted down the path to head off the desperadoes and their prisoner.

CHAPTER IV.

DEADSHOT DEAN INTERFERES.

CARROL DEAN had once met Buffalo Bill, when as the guide of a troop of cavalry he had camped one night by the wagon-train in which he had made his way westward, after leaving the railroads.

He had heard and often read of the scout, and had been glad to have a talk with him, finding him a courteous and pleasant companion.

Now he recognized him at a glance, though several years since he had seen him, and he at once knew that there was some deviltry going on—that the scout was in great peril.

So down the hill he bounded, as agile as a deer, following the path which brought him into the trail just ahead of the crowd of men and their prisoner.

"Yes, it is as I thought: they are the cut-throats of the mines, and Buffalo Bill is at their mercy. He needs a friend now and I'll be that to the brave scout or perish with him," was the young miner's resolve.

Then, as the desperadoes approached, the resolute fellow called out:

"Ho, pard, what are you doing with Buffalo Bill a prisoner?"

"It hain't Buf'ler Bill, Deadshot Dean; but he's a pris'ner, and if yer wants ter see what we is doing with him, jist come along ter Hangman's Gulch and yer'll find out," responded Powder Face Pete, the leader of the gang.

The ruffian's face was blackened with powder specks and also disfigured by a wound from a knife, showing that he had had some very close calls from sudden and violent death.

He was a gambler and a desperado, and few men in the mines cared to risk a quarrel with Powder Face Pete.

"I tell you that it is Buffalo Bill, the Government scout and guide, for though I have met him but once, and several years ago, I recognize him."

"Yes, I recall your face now, sir.

"I met you with a wagon-train bound West and we camped together one night."

"I remember that you showed me a picture of your wife, and how beautiful she was," said the scout.

"True, sir, you have a good memory indeed; but what is the trouble between you and these men?"

"Oh, they lariated me and my horse, and got me foul before I had time to use my weapons, and they say that I am Silk Lasso Sam the road-agent."

"It is false, as I can swear."

"And I kin swear that he is not Buf'ler Bill," said Powder Face Pete.

"Then you would swear to a lie, though that would not surprise me in the least, Powder Face Pete, knowing your ugly record as I do," said the miner, quietly, and in spite of his peril Buffalo Bill laughed and said:

"You've got him down fine, sir."

"See here, Deadshot Dean, is yer seeking trouble with me?"

"I do not seek it, Powder Face Pete, and I shall not avoid it, for I do not fear any such bully as you are; but I shall not allow you to harm this man."

"Yer won't, won't yer?"

"No."

"Waal, he's our pris'ner, and I knows he is Silk Lasso Sam, while I hev got a big bulk o'

money I tuk from him, and which he has robbed a Government paymaster of."

"He did take a large sum of money from me, sir, and I got it from Captain Lennox, the fort paymaster, whom I found dying by the side of the trail, for he had been fired upon by road-agents and wounded.

"He gave me all he had with him, and wrote his will, which that wretch also has, and I was on my way to the fort when these devils caught me.

"That is all there is to it, sir."

"It is enough to enlist me on your side, in spite of the odds, and you have me to fight, Powder Face Pete, if you do not release that man and his possessions at once."

"Waal, I won't do it, fer he's a road-agent, as I knows, and we intends ter hang him in the gulch yonder, and try him arterwards."

"I say no, and I feel that your comrades will side with me," and Deadshot Dean placed himself before the crowd now, and faced them.

There were some who felt that it was best not to push matters against the scout, as the recognition of him by Deadshot Dean had done away with any doubt as to his identity, if they had felt any before.

But there were others who still clung by their leader.

He had the money, and they could say that they thought that Buffalo Bill was Silk Lasso Sam, whom they knew to be not unlike Buffalo Bill in appearance.

"Does yer mean ter say, Deadshot Dean, that yer intends ter chip in here ag'in' me?" asked the desperado in a tone which he meant should terrify the one who had dared to interfere with him.

"It is just what I do mean to say, Powder Face Pete, for I shall resist the murderous intention of yourself and your cut-throat band, if I lose my own life in the attempt."

"And if I do I will at least have the satisfaction of knowing that you and others will accompany me upon the last long trail."

This was spoken with utter fearlessness, and the crowd saw that they had brought a dangerous and brave man to bay.

"Waal, Deadshot Dean, as yer seems ignorant of who I be, I has got ter eddicate yer, I guesses, and so I'll tell yer that I has a record in these mines of killin' over a dozen better men than you be, and ef yer interferes with me yer'll be writ down on my list as one who didn't know I was loaded for tenderfeet."

"Oh, I know that you are a desperado of the worst kind, and have a record as a murderer, a bully and a thief; but for all that I do interfere and tell you that you shall never raise hand against Buffalo Bill, bound hand and foot as he is and at your mercy."

"Now, play your hand, Powder Face Pete, and play for life or death," said the young miner coolly.

CHAPTER V.

THE MINER KEEPS HIS WORD.

By a strange act of forgetfulness the desperadoes had not disarmed Buffalo Bill.

His rifle hung to his saddle-horn, his revolvers and knife were still in his belt.

They had bound his hands securely, and his feet were tied under his horse, and with him thus secure they had felt no dread even of him.

The crowd had stood grouped together, during the words passed between their ringleader and Deadshot Dean the miner.

They were with their leader wholly, though there were some who felt that their prisoner was not the outlaw, Silk Lasso Sam, but really Buffalo Bill, and the slightest thing would have caused them to show a willingness to compromise.

Such was the intention when the miner, so pluckily and alone, threw the gauntlet of defiance in the teeth of Powder Face Pete.

The latter gave a glance into the face of the miner, and then at Buffalo Bill.

He saw that Deadshot Dean meant all that he said, and more, he knew his record.

Then he looked at Buffalo Bill, and the latter said with a mocking laugh:

"You got it pat that time, Powder Face, so what are you going to do about it?"

Before replying the desperado turned for a look at his companions.

He saw the situation at a glance.

About half were in favor of retreating from their position of hanging their prisoner.

The others looked undecided, with perhaps two or three who were heart and hand with Powder Face Pete.

The latter was disappointed.

He had hoped to be fully backed up.

Were the prisoner any other than Buffalo Bill, he would have been.

But he was not a man to retreat when odds were in his favor, and so he turned again to the miner, drawing his revolver as he did so.

When he faced him, however, he found himself covered by the miner's pistol.

"Yer darned fools, why didn't yer tell me he was drawin' on me?" he queried.

"It was done so quick, pard," answered one.

"Yer axes me, Buf'ler Bill, what I intends ter do about this chipper young man's chin music!"

"Yes, and I notice you call me by my name."

The man uttered an oath at having been so cleverly picked up.

"I tells yer now what I'll do."

"Well, talk quick or act!" came in the commanding voice of the miner.

"I intends ter hang you, Buf'ler Bill, and this pilgrim, too, who has chipped in when it wasn't his play."

"All right, Powder Face Peter! Fire away!" said the miner, coolly.

"Yer has got me covered, Deadshot Dean, so I calls upon my friends ter tackle yer."

"If one of them attempts to carry out your threat against Buffalo Bill I shall plant a bullet between your eyes, Powder Face Pete, and I make no idle boast," assured the miner.

The men hesitated for they knew just how the miner had won his name as a Deadshot.

"Pards, is yer goin' ter let one man bully yer all?" cried the ringleader, savagely.

"It hain't fer us ter say, Pete, so tell us, if you says crowd him."

"I says rush him, pards," suddenly cried Powder Face Pete, and with his words he threw his rifle to a level with the miner's revolver.

But, quicker than was his movement came the pull upon the trigger of the miner's revolver. Just as Deadshot Dean had threatened, he sent a bullet between the eyes of the leader of the desperadoes, as they rushed upon their prisoner, Buffalo Bill.

The stricken Pete sprung high in the air, and fell all in a heap just as Deadshot Dean fired a second and a third time, and in each instance broke the bone of the right arm of one of the desperadoes as they leveled their weapons to fire.

Then, quick as a flash, Deadshot Dean, with his knife in his left hand severed the rope that bound Buffalo Bill's hands, still keeping his revolver at a level upon the crowd of now, surging and infuriated desperadoes.

The moment that the crowd saw that Buffalo Bill had been set free by Deadshot Dean, they broke and fled for cover, leaving their leader dead upon the scene, while the two men with their right arms shattered by the bullet of the miner's unerring revolver, followed them, writhing with pain—all the fight taken out of them.

"Well, Pard Deadshot, you are a dandy in a scrimmage and no mistake."

"That was the prettiest work I ever witnessed, so cool and neat."

"Give me your hand, and let me tell you that I owe you my life, and when Buffalo Bill tells you that he is yours to command, he means every word of it," and the scout grasped the hand of Deadshot Dean and wrung it warmly.

"I am most glad to have served you, Buffalo Bill; but let me set your feet free, and then you can take from the body of that man all that he robbed you of."

"He knew well enough that you were not Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw, only in some way he had heard of your having a large lot of money with you and sought to get it."

"Now, come to my cabin up yonder on the hill, and leave these vultures skulking there to look after their dead and wounded," and the miner pointed to the crowd of desperadoes who had halted some distance off, and were anxiously watching the scout and that man with the terrible gun—Deadshot Dean.

CHAPTER VI.

PARDS FOR LIFE.

THE band of desperadoes were cowed: there was no doubting that fact.

The death of their leader, a man who had been a terror in the camps, and the groaning and whining of the two wounded men, gave them a wholesome example of what death and suffering were.

But they viewed with anxious eyes Buffalo Bill bending over Powder Face Pete and taking from his body the things he had stolen from him.

"I will call some of those men here, Buffalo Bill, to see that you simply take your own," said the miner.

"Yes, that is a good idea, sir, or they will accuse me of robbing him."

"Ho, men, three of you come here."

In answer to the miner's call there was a stir among the desperadoes and yet none of them obeyed.

"You are in no danger."

"I wish to talk with three of you."

After some delay there were three who ventured to approach, the others watching them anxiously.

"See here, men, I wish you to take notice of just what Buffalo Bill intends taking from the body of your leader."

"You know what he was robbed of, and he wants only that which you took from him," said the miner.

"I told Pete he were making a mistake, that I know'd Buf'ler Bill and he were wrong," said one.

Buffalo Bill turned and eyed the speaker a moment.

Then he said quietly:

"You lie, and you know it, for you were one who urged him on; but the quarrel is over unless the colonel sends a troop here from the fort to find the men who first attacked and wounded Paymaster Lennox and then ambushed and captured me, and robbed me, threatening also to hang me."

The words of the scout seemed to impress the men greatly.

They began to feel that they had gone too far.

Then the scout continued:

"You may tell your friends too that if this miner has any harm befall him, for his act this day in protecting a Government officer, that the colonel will see to it that every man in this gang, who attacked me to-day, and I have you all spotted, will be hunted down as though you were wolves."

"See, here are the papers taken from the paymaster, and here is the money."

"Now comes his watch, chain, ring and sleeve-buttons with his pocketbook."

"Yes, and here is my watch and chain and my money too."

"You see of his own he has two packs of cards, half a dozen finger rings, all stolen I'll guarantee, his weapons and a roll of money, which I will count, so that you three cannot divide it among you."

"Yes, just sixty-three dollars, see!"

"Now I have done with you."

"As I am also, only carry away your dead leader for burial and you had better take your two wounded men on to the camps, to the doctor there."

"Now, Buffalo Bill, I am ready," and the miner led the way up the steep path to his cabin, Buffalo Bill following on foot and leading his horse.

As they reached the cabin they looked back and saw the desperadoes moving off on the trail with their dead and wounded, and going in the direction of the camps.

"You have a snug little home here, sir," said the scout.

"No place is home, Mr. Cody, without one's loved ones," returned the miner.

"Very true, sir, and it is a hard life one leads here, hunting for a fortune, away from all he loves; but I hope you are doing well?"

"I am making a little money, sir, and hope for a change for the better, for I am anxious to get back to my home in Tennessee."

"Now with me it is different, for upon the border is my home and my duties call me here."

"You would make a great scout, sir."

"You think so?"

"Oh, yes, for though I have heard of Dead-shot Dean, I had no idea he was one I had met before."

"I heard of your affair that gave you your name, sir, and to-day's act will add to your fame."

"Such as it is, though I am not ambitious to pose as a man-killer."

"No, I can understand that, for had you been you would have killed those other two men instead of breaking their arms, as you did."

"Yes, I did not wish their lives upon my hands, but Powder Face Pete I was forced to kill, and he was one of the worst men in the mines."

"Look out for his gang, let me urge you, for they will try and avenge him; but now that I have met you I will try and give you a call now and then, show myself and my scouts among the camps, and see if the colonel will not send a troop through occasionally, for it will have a good effect and show these lawless fellows that we are watching them."

"I thank you, Mr. Cody, but I keep close to my cabin, work hard and only go to the camps for my mail and provisions."

"But you will remain with me to-night, for I have a spare cot and plenty to eat."

The scout accepted the invitation willingly, and so his horse was staked out near, a good supper prepared and until late into the night the two newly found friends talked together.

When Buffalo Bill departed the next morning a friendship had sprung up between them which was life-long.

CHAPTER VII.

PIONEER POST.

FORT PIONEER, or Pioneer Post, as it was generally called, was located about sixty miles from the Yellow Dust mining-camps, where Carroll Dean had been so long toiling for a fortune.

In the mining-camps of Yellow Valley, which extended some twenty miles along the stream, were some three thousand souls, scattered in the canyons, mountains and glens contiguous to the central mining-camp which was known as "Pocket City."

The element of such a community was naturally vicious, where so many reckless souls were gathered in the struggle to win fortune.

Where two-thirds were honest workers in their claims, one-third was the disturbing element of professional money-makers in any way it could

be obtained, with fugitives from justice, cut-throats, and rowdies in general to make up the population.

Here and there some gold-hunter, or perhaps storekeeper had brought his family, so that occasionally a woman and a few children were seen, but seldom.

A coach ran from the mines once in a week, and returned as often, bringing the mail and what passengers cared to go or come.

Beyond the gold belt of this wild community was the danger line of the Indian country, and this extended north and south for many a long mile.

Over these camps and the Indian country, with the settlements of cattlemen further eastward the commandant of Pioneer Post held jurisdiction, and the work was such as to keep him busy.

There was an Overland stage trail running westward, another going to and from the settlements, and a third that had its terminus at the post, all weekly lines, and these had to be guarded from the road-agents that infested the way.

The cattlemen had to have their herds protected from horse and cow thieves and Indians and the miners looked to the military for protection also from an organized band of gold-robbers and an occasional dash of the Indians upon them.

About the post were some settlers, farmers and herders, there were large herds of Government cattle to look after; and altogether Colonel Oscar Dunwoody had his hands full in caring for those who were under his especial protection.

To aid him he had five companies of cavalry, one battery of light artillery of eight guns, and three battalions of infantry of three companies each.

Then there was a troop of scouts, thirty in number, under the captaincy of Buffalo Bill, who had as a reserve to call upon in need, half a hundred daring fighters and riders, who were part scout, part guide, part Indian-fighter, and the balance cowboys, and they were in charge of the Government herds.

In case of a large uprising among the Indians, Colonel Dunwoody could call to his aid over a thousand volunteers, of miners, cattlemen, and settlers, so that he could place a force in the field in a couple of days' notice of over two thousand fighters, and good ones too.

Pioneer Post was located upon a bluff overhanging a river, and heavily timbered.

Around the base of the bluff ran a stockade wall, crescent-shaped, extending from the river below, around to the river above the fort proper, and the space was held in reserve for the cattle and horses, should they be penned in by a siege of the Indians.

There were fields of corn, oats, and wheat near, a vegetable farm, saw-mill and grist-mill, so that the fort was almost self-supporting.

The top of the bluff was a level plateau, many acres in size, with the barracks of the soldiers built at equal distances on the crescent line of fortifications, the guns having position between them, and the rear of the cabins being made into a fort wall with a breastwork of logs upon the roof.

The officer's quarters extended along the bluff with the headquarters the dividing line, the hospitals, store-houses, sutlers' and officers' club-house being beyond the stables at the further end.

A stockade wall ran along the bluff its whole length, to protect the garrison from shots upon the other side of the river, and there were ports for the artillery and rifles, with a lookout tower, and sheltered pumps to draw up water in case of a siege.

Into this frontier post it would have taken an immense army of red-skins to gain an entrance, or do much damage, and all in the fort felt their security, for nearly all of the married officers, and many of the soldiers, had their families with them.

Having made the reader acquainted with Pioneer Post, in the next chapter I will introduce him to some of the dwellers there, and who will figure prominently in the pages of this romance.

CHAPTER VIII.

FAIR FRONTIER RIVALS.

COLONEL DUNWOODY was a young man for the command he held, but he had won his promotions on the field for daring and skill as a commander in the Civil War.

His hair was prematurely gray upon each temple, and his mustache streaked with silver, with certain lines upon his face, gave him the appearance of being a man of fifty, when he was ten years younger.

A perfect soldier, thorough disciplinarian, and yet true as steel to his men, he was beloved by all, while his courtly manners and prowess as a brilliant man of the world made him most popular with all whom he met in society.

A bachelor, and a handsome man, with a snug little sinecure of his own, independent of his pay, rendered him a good catch for designing maidens and their mothers.

There were at the fort some twenty married ladies, and an equal number of young ladies, with a couple of score of children of all ages, so that the social life there was very gay and enjoyable, and every one did all in their power for their mutual pleasure.

Riding and hunting-parties, boating, fishing, dancing, lawn tennis, polo, croquet, and games among the soldiers, with pedestrian-matches, tournaments among the officers, riding, shooting and lasso-matches were the amusements which caused the time to pass pleasantly, while there was spice enough in the dangerous life they all led on the far frontier to suit the more adventurous spirits.

The weekly arrival and departure of the stage eastward, for none dared penetrate further westward at that point, were events of interest, while the daily parades, drills and the music of the band added to the charm of Pioneer Post.

Colonel Dunwoody had on his staff an assistant adjutant-general, surgeon, commissary, quartermaster, paymaster and two aides as his military family, and then came the next to him in rank, the lieutenant-colonel commanding the cavalry, a major of infantry, the captain of the light battery and the respective company officers, which, counting the assistant surgeons, made up a force of nearly fifty commissioned officers, about half of whom were bachelors, or "married men on leave," as those who had not their wives and children with them were called.

But now to present those who are more closely connected with the happenings of this romance of strange realities in the frontier life led by our soldiers and scouts, and those whom various motives have drawn to dwell amid the perils of the wild West.

It takes all kinds of people to make up a world, and the little world of Pioneer Post was no exception to the rule.

These were popular people and those who were unpopular were beaux and belles, and married as well as single flirts of both sexes.

Among the ladies of the post there was none who held the power that Clarice Carr did.

She was visiting there an old schoolmate, the wife of Major Lionel Lester, and herself a beautiful woman she shared with Clarice Carr her guest the attention of the gentlemen.

The young lady had an income it was said, but just how large not even the most inquisitive fortune-hunter had been able to ascertain.

She was a Southern girl, and an orphan, had been educated partly in Boston and finished abroad in one of the best schools in Paris.

Showing a decided talent as a vocalist and also a musician, she had been urged to go upon the operatic stage, but had shown no ambition that way.

An artist, whose work had won the highest praise, she had not cared to make art a profession.

Reared in the saddle she had become a perfect horsewoman and when visiting in England had led a field of the best riders over many a rough course in chase of a fox whose brush she invariably won.

She was a fearless swimmer and had terrorized all by her bold ventures at Newport in the surf.

Taught fencing in Paris she had kept up this accomplishment with her shooting, which she also excelled in, and many a time in crossing blades with the officers she had disarmed the best of them.

She was a woman of nerve, utterly fearless and could talk horse, fishing, shooting, the army or navy with any one, or flirt with the most blase man of the world, and entertain most charmingly.

She read French, Spanish and German as she did English, was up in the history of the world in general, and, the devoted admirer of children and old people, was popular with every one.

Beautiful she certainly was, and possessed of an exquisite form as well, and the great wonder of all was why she had never married, for she was verging on to twenty-six she frankly admitted, though she scarcely looked over twenty.

Clarice had a rival at the fort in the person of Nina De Sutro, the adopted daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel Ravel DeSutro, a French officer who had volunteered in the United States service during the war, his mother having been an American, and whose gallant record had gained him a regular army appointment.

When in command of a Texas frontier post after the war, Colonel De Sutro had wedded a lovely Mexican girl, and having no children had adopted a little girl, a relative of his wife, and the little Nina had taken the name of her adopted parents.

Nina De Sutro had been reared almost like a boy, in the wild life she had led on the Texas frontier, yet she possessed the most womanly qualities and could entertain in the drawing room with her accomplishments as well as win admiration in the saddle.

She appeared to be devoted to Clarice Carr, and yet the latter could never learn to love her in return, though ever most polite and kind to her.

Mrs. De Sutro had insisted that Nina should receive the finishing touches of her education in Mexico, her native land, and thither she had been sent for three years, so that she claimed to be half American, half Mexican.

Through her own mother it was said she had been left a large fortune, which was in the keeping of her adopted parents, who were by no means rich themselves.

There was a rivalry existing between Nina De Sutro and Clarice Carr, admitted by the former, denied by the latter, who said that she held no claims upon any one.

They both had most ardent admirers, and where Clarice was general in her friendships, it was said that Nina liked Colonel Dunwoody more than any one else, and failing to catch him, had in view Captain Dick Caruth, of the cavalry, and Lieutenant Vassar Turpin in view as holdbacks, and all of these were great admirers of the lovely Clarice, and the three officers were all the possessors of riches.

Such was the situation at Pioneer Post when Buffalo Bill returned one afternoon from the scouting expedition to the mines which had so nearly proven fatal to him.

CHAPTER IX.

BUFFALO BILL TELLS HIS STORY.

THAT the chief of scouts, William F. Cody, was popular at Pioneer Post, was evidenced by the manner in which he was received upon his arrival there the afternoon of his return from Yellow Dust Valley Mines, where, but for Carroll Dean the Lone Miner he would have died at the rope end.

The sentinel saluted him, the cowboys gave him a wave of their hats as a welcome, and several officers he passed spoke pleasantly to him.

Some soldiers grouped together near the stockade gate welcomed him back, and the children, as he rode toward headquarters, cheered him, and uttered many a hearty greeting.

"The chief of scouts wishes to see you, sir," said Colonel Dunwoody's orderly, entering the room where that officer sat, conversing with Captain Dick Caruth and Lieutenant Vassar Turpin.

"Show him in at once, orderly," was the colonel's reply.

Then as the scout entered he said pleasantly:

"Ho, Cody, you know the old saying about speaking of the devil, and *et cetera*, for we were talking of you when the orderly announced your name."

"It came nearer never being announced on this trip, sir, than ever before, but thanks to a brave miner I am here to report to you, Colonel Dunwoody, and I regret to say, sir, that I have sad news for you," said Buffalo Bill quietly.

"Indeed, I am sorry to hear this."

"Sit down and tell me if there has anything gone wrong, and I hope the Indians are not on the war-path, for I have just told these gentlemen why I had sent you off on a scout, to see what the red-skins were about."

"The Indians are uneasy, sir, as they always are when hatching trouble, but I do not believe will go on the war-path for some time yet."

"I went into their country and watched their villages closely unseen of course by them."

"I returned by Yellow Dust Valley and fortunately, for I came upon Captain Lennox, your paymaster, dying by the roadside."

"Lennox dying?" cried the colonel with some excitement.

"He is dead, sir," was the sad response.

There was a silence of fully a minute as each one present recalled the honest, good face of the comrade they had lost.

"He had arrived at the station sooner than he expected, sir, he told me, so would not wait for an escort, nor would he take the stage coach, as he feared being robbed."

"He therefore decided to come through alone on horseback and bought a horse and outfit at the station for this purpose."

"He should have waited an escort."

"There was one thing against that, sir, as he said he was fearful of being robbed if he remained, for the station was over-run with desperadoes."

"Some of them must have suspected him of having money, and sent word ahead to the road-agents, for he rode into an ambush, and when he was ordered to halt, broke through."

"Brave fellow."

"But he was wounded three times, sir, and his horse received a slight wound, which however did not retard his speed, for he distanced all pursuit."

"But the noble animal at last fell from fatigue, and after going some miles further Paymaster Lennox sunk down on the side of the trail unable to go further."

"There I found him several hours after and he was dying."

"Poor Lennox," the colonel said, feelingly.

"While I was with him two horsemen passed who said they were miners, and I sent word by them for the surgeon at the mines to come to my aid at once."

"But he died soon after, and I took from him the money and other things he had of value."

"Here they are, sir, and as you see he had a large sum of money with him," and Buffalo Bill placed the several packages upon the table.

"He had, indeed, and you were fortunate to be near, Cody."

"I wrote down what he asked me to do, sir, for the Government, and of a private nature, and here are the papers."

"You have done well, Cody, and you deserve the highest praise."

"Thank you, Colonel Dunwoody."

"Of course I had to bury the captain there, where he died, wrapping the body in his blanket and digging a grave with my bowie."

"I covered the grave with heavy stones, and then, as it was night, remained for rest until the following morning."

"The next afternoon as I was near Yellow Dust Valley I rode into an ambush."

"What?"

"My horse was lassoed and I had three lariats thrown over me, sir, while some dozen men sprung out and covered me with their revolvers."

"They dared do this in that valley?"

"It was near Pocket City, sir, and they were the wicked element of the mines who did it, and I think I recognized the two men among them whom I saw when I was with Captain Lennox, though they had changed their appearance to deceive me."

"The scoundrels!"

"Of course, sir, resistance was useless, out of the question, and not thinking they would dare harm or rob me, I could do nothing else than surrender."

"I was at once bound to my horse, however, robbed of all I had of the captain's and my own, and then led toward Hangman's Gulch to be hanged as Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw chief, for whom they pretended to take me," and the last words of the scout created a decided impression among those who heard them.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNFORTUNATE RESEMBLANCE.

"You were taken for that infamous scamp Silk Lasso Sam?" cried the colonel in utter amazement.

"Yes, sir, and as far as looks go I believe I was complimented, for he is said to be a hand-some devil," said Buffalo Bill with a smile.

"Yes, and a vicious devil as well, with a heart of iron and a conscience of india-rubber."

"I have heard him described, sir, as being a man very much of the style of Cody," said Captain Dick Caruth, who was one of the handsomest men in the army.

"Doctor Powell has seen him, sir, in fact was robbed by him, and can tell us," Lieutenant Vassar Turpin remarked.

"Who takes my name in vain?" said a cheery voice at the door, and in walked the one whose name Lieutenant Turpin had just uttered.

It was Doctor Frank Powell, the post surgeon, and a man whose name and fame is world-wide, for in addition to being a skilled physician, a most expert surgeon and perfect soldier he was noted as one of the heroes of the plains, a scout and Indian fighter whose record is second to Buffalo Bill alone.

"I am glad you have come, Powell; sit down and hear Cody's story," said the colonel to the dashing, handsome surgeon, with a nature as gentle as a woman's and a heart like a lion when aroused.

"Cody was just saying that he had been mistaken for Silk Lasso Sam, the outlaw chief, though first let me tell you that he brings the sad news of poor Lennox having been killed by the road-agents."

"Ha! Lennox killed, and by those cowardly coyotes."

"They shall pay for this," and the face of the surgeon changed in a flash, showing what he could be when aroused by hatred or anger.

Buffalo Bill told of the death of the paymaster, and of his capture for Silk Lasso Sam, and Doctor Powell said thoughtfully:

"Well, you do look like the fellow, Cody."

"You are about his build, and he wears his hair as you do, with mustache and imperial, also."

"But his face is darker, his eyes are blue, a bad combination, by the way, black hair and blue eyes, for they do not go together, and he has a sneer, a grin, a smile, all combined upon his mouth, like a hyena showing his teeth, while you, Bill, you know, have the sanctimonious look about the mouth of an army chaplain, old in the service."

"Still you might be mistaken for Silk Lasso Sam, especially if there was reason for so doing."

"Well, I came very near being hanged for him, and would have been but for the rescue by one of the gamest men I ever crossed the trail of."

"That is saying a good deal, Cody," said the colonel, with a smile.

"I will tell you what he did, sir, and you can judge."

"His cabin was upon the spur of a mountain, and he was enjoying his pipe and rest after a

Sabbath-day dinner, when my captors came in sight with me."

"He recognized me, having met me several years ago with you, Captain Caruth, when we camped one night near a wagon-train of emigrants, and kept them from being attacked by Indians."

"Yes, I remember the circumstance," said the captain.

"He at once came to my rescue, halted the gang, and asked why I was a prisoner."

"The leader, a gentleman by the name of Powder Face Pete, and one of the worst men in the mines, said that I was Silk Lasso Sam, and had killed and robbed an army paymaster, and I was to be hanged when we reached Hangman's Gulch, half a mile beyond."

"The miner, who is known as Deadshot Dean—"

"I have heard of him," said Surgeon Powell.

"Yes, he made his record as a shot one night when attacked by a band of ruffians."

"He said that I was not Silk Lasso Sam, that I was Buffalo Bill, and he would protect me, so invited Powder Face to play his hand."

"There was some talk, and next Deadshot Dean said that if any of the band made an effort to attack him he would plant a bullet between the eyes of Mister Powder Face Pete."

"The leader then made an effort to fire, but the miner kept his word, nailing him squarely between the eyes, and breaking the right arm of the two men who had been most anxious to back up their chief."

"Quick as lightning too he cut the rope that bound my hands, so I could go into the killing business too, and the gang scattered like a pack of wolves."

"I got the things I had been robbed of, from the body of Powder Face Pete, the miner calling three of the gang back to see that I did not rob their leader of the packs of cards, and other valuables he possessed."

"Then he ordered them off with the dead man and their two wounded pards, and insisted on me to remain all night at his cabin."

"I did so, and all I can say is that he is a gentleman, a man of education, full of nerve, and I fear not in as good luck as he deserves."

"Well, Cody, he has rendered the Government splendid service in saving you and the money poor Lennox was robbed of, and anything I can do for him I shall be most happy to do," said Colonel Dunwoody.

"He is not a man to accept aid, I am sure, sir, but I think he might be put under good pay as a Government detective and spy, on the movements of the road-agents, and this would help him, sir."

"The very man I want, and in the very place I need him, for this Silk Lasso Sam and his band must be wiped out," said the colonel with determination.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MINER SPY.

THE story of Buffalo Bill had been listened to by all three of the officers with the deepest of interest.

That the miner Carroll Dean had won the admiration of all by his daring and nerve, was certain, and Colonel Dunwoody said, after the scout had finished his story:

"Well, Cody, your friend deserves all the praise we can bestow upon him, and I will certainly be glad to reward him in any way he will accept recompense."

"As I said, Colonel Dunwoody, I am sure that he is not one to be paid for a service, for he is a gentleman of refinement and education."

"He came West because he was poor and his father owned an old claim which he hoped would pan out well for him."

"He left a wife and child at his home in the South, and he is struggling on to win a fortune for them."

"In all cases he has held aloof from others, and though courteous to all he does not go with any of the miners."

"Such is the story he told me of himself, and in his cabin are many evidences that he is not forgotten by those at home, for there are a great number of little articles sent to him to add to his comfort, while he receives papers and books at every mail."

"But you think his claim is not a paying one, Cody?"

"He did not say as much, sir, but he told me he hoped it would improve."

"And any services he might render he would accept pay for, you think?"

"I am sure, sir, if given some such position as I referred to, he would feel that he was earning his pay."

"Well, I am entitled under late orders, to employ a detective on the Overland to get some clew to the robbers who have of late been rifling the mails."

"The position will pay fairly well, say a hundred dollars a month, and I can offer it to this miner, telling him to devote what time he can to obtaining clews to the retreats of these robbers, their number and identity."

"I feel sure, sir, that he would do this, for he told me he would be glad to aid in any way in his power, to drive off the robbers that infest this part of the country, and spoke of it as a shame that Silk Lasso Sam had not been caught in spite of all the traps laid to insnare him."

"Yes, it is a pity and a shame, and yet I feel that we have done all in our power to entrap that outlaw chief and his band."

"Yes, colonel, and he is getting bolder," Captain Dick Caruth said.

"He is indeed, but I hope we will soon be able to run him to earth."

"But, Cody, this robbery and murder of poor Lennox was not by Silk Lasso Sam, you say?"

"You misunderstood me, colonel, for if it was not by Silk Lasso Sam, I cannot but believe that Powder Face Pete was one of his men, and so thought Deadshot Dean also."

"He did have that idea, then?"

"Yes, sir, and was confident that Pocket City was the headquarters of Silk Lasso Sam's spies."

"Then the miner will be in the very spot to act as detective, and when you return for the body of Captain Lennox, as I wish you to do, you can carry word to Deadshot Dean that he is to serve as a Secret Service man for me, under the pay of one hundred dollars per month."

"He will have to report to me in some way, any discoveries he may make, and endeavor all in his power to break up this band of frontier lawbreakers."

"Yes, sir, I will so report to him your wishes, and I believe you will find him just the man you wish in your service."

"I sincerely hope so, Cody, but now you need rest, especially as I wish you to start back upon the morrow with an escort to get the remains of Paymaster Lennox and bring them to the fort for burial."

Buffalo Bill now arose and departed, the colonel remarking after he had left:

"There is one of the gamiest men I ever knew, and as modest as he is brave."

"I only wish I had more like him in my command."

"He is all that you say he is, Colonel Dunwoody, as I have had reason to know a hundred times or more, for Buffalo Bill has saved me from death on many an occasion," earnestly remarked Surgeon Frank Powell.

"And it appears to me, Powell, that there is a tradition that you have often saved the life of Buffalo Bill, and are just as modest about your achievements as he is," Captain Caruth remarked.

"What is the use of boasting of one's own deeds, Dick, when I can leave it to such good friends of mine as you are to do it for me?" Frank Powell responded with a smile.

After some further conversation upon the subject, Colonel Dunwoody decided that it would be well to send a few soldiers under Captain Caruth to Yellow Dust Valley for the body of Paymaster Lennox, and that Surgeon Powell was to accompany them, while Buffalo Bill was to act as guide to the spot where the body had been buried.

Of course the soldiers were not to visit the cabin of Deadshot Dean, as it might arouse suspicion against the miner, but, if possible, the officers were to see and have a talk with him upon the new duties he was to enter upon.

This being decided upon, the next morning the soldiers rode out of the fort with Buffalo Bill leading as guide.

CHAPTER XII.

SILK LASSO SAM.

AMONG the greatest worries which Colonel Dunwoody had to contend with upon the frontier, was the band of road-agents who infested the trails, holding up coaches, travelers on horseback, wagon-trains, and now and then robbing a ranch or mining-camp.

These were said to be from a dozen to half a hundred in number, never struck their "blows" twice in the same spot, and were as cunning as foxes, defying capture in spite of the most vigorous pursuit by ten times their number sent against them.

They were more troublesome than the Indians, equally as much to be feared, and from their chief down rewards had been offered upon their heads dead or alive.

One reward was from the Government of five thousand dollars for their chief and one thousand for any of the men of his band.

This was duplicated by the reward offered by the Overland Stage Company, while a third reward was offered by the settlers of like amount, and the miners of the camps equaled it.

Then there was a fifth reward in a purse of one thousand dollars put up by Colonel Dunwoody and his officers at the fort for the capture of the outlaw chief dead or alive.

It was not to be wondered at that with the sum of twenty-one thousand dollars offered for his head, the chief of the outlaws was greatly sought after, while the capture, or killing, of one of his men would bring four thousand dollars to the man who captured or killed him.

The band was known from their appearing first in one place and then in another as "The

Will-o'-the-Wisps," and their leader had won the name of Silk Lasso Sam from the fact that he carried a beautifully woven lariat of red silk, which he was capable of using with astonishing skill.

What his real name was no one knew, or where he had come from, though it was said, as his equipments and dress were Mexican, that he had been a Texan bandit driven into Mexico, and then had made his way northward to the frontier to again turn to his deeds of outlawry.

His men spoke of him as captain, calling him by no name, though to the people of the border he was Silk Lasso Sam.

The deeds of this outlaw were numerous and cruel, and he handled his band with the skill of a trained soldier.

Where his retreat was had puzzled the best scouts, and yet that he had a hiding-place for the quantities of plunder he often got possession of, and a herding place for the horses and stock he robbed the post, settlement and mining-camps of, there was no doubt whatever.

But where it was located had not yet been discovered.

To-day he was seen upon one stage trail, and to-morrow at the mining-camps.

One day he was seen at the fort, or near it, and again in the settlements, always in a different disguise and yet always leaving a proof that Silk Lasso Sam had been in the midst of his foes.

The man seemed to love to play with the most deadly danger, and would laugh at all efforts to capture him.

That he had spies in the mining-camps, settlement and even at the fort was without doubt true, for he seemed to know of the movement of trains coming Westward that were valuable, and of the sending Eastward of gold from the mines.

If a stage coach brought passengers with money or jewelry of value, that coach was almost certain to be held up by Silk Lasso Sam.

He always demanded implicit obedience to his orders, but if resisted in his robberies he would at once become merciless.

The most thrilling and terrible stories were told of the cruelties of Silk Lasso Sam, and yet few could vouch for them as being true.

Surgeon Frank Powell had once been in the coach which had been halted by the Will-o'-the-Wisps.

The surgeon was asleep at the time, and awakening suddenly discovered the situation.

Resistance was useless for the coach was covered by a dozen rifles.

"You are Frank Powell, the Surgeon Scout?" asked the outlaw leader looking curiously at the officer.

"I am, and you are Silk Lasso Sam, the outlaw?"

"I am, and as I admire a man of nerve I shall not rob you," was the answer of the outlaw.

"Oh yes, I ask no favors of you, and I accept the situation with the others, be it what it may," answered the surgeon.

"As you insist I will rob you, and having refused the favor I sought to show you, remember that the next time we meet it will be your life I will take, for I never forgive a slight."

"Just as you please, sir, and let me state that I will accept the gauntlet you throw down when next we meet, that it be your life or mine."

"It is a bargain," was the smiling reply of Silk Lasso Sam, and all who knew the two men felt that it would be a duel to the death when and wherever they met each other.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ACCEPTANCE.

THE sun was just setting on the Tuesday following his Sabbath day adventure with the band of desperadoes under Powder Face Pete, when Deadshot Dean lighted his pipe and took a seat in his rustic easy-chair in front of his cabin.

He had worked hard in the mine all day, and had gotten but a few dollars in precious metal.

Returning to his home he had eaten his supper and then sat down to rest and view the grand sunset, a delight he enjoyed immensely while he thought of the loved ones at home.

Suddenly the sound of hoofs fell upon his ears, and he saw coming around the bend in the trail where he had seen the desperadoes approaching with Buffalo Bill, no other than the scout himself.

Following him were two officers in uniform and close upon their heels came a score of soldiers with two negro servants and several pack-horses bringing up their rear.

"Ah! the scout is back soon, and I suppose intends to hunt down those ruffians who attacked him."

"It is nightfall, and there is a fine camping-place there on the brook, while I can take care of the officers, so I will haul them."

So saying Carroll Dean arose and hastened down the path toward the trail.

"Ho, Scout Cody, glad to see you again."

"Will not those gentlemen share my hospitality with you for the night, while the men can find an excellent camping-place near?"

"I will be glad to have you, gentlemen," and

the miner turned to the two officers who just then rode up.

Buffalo Bill shook Carroll Dean warmly by the hand and presented him to Captain Dick Caruth and Surgeon Frank Powell, who greeted him warmly, while the former said:

"The truth is, Mr. Dean, one of our motives in coming to this part of the country was to see you, but we concluded to do so secretly as we feared our visit might get you into trouble with some of your evil-disposed neighbors."

"Do not mind that, Captain Caruth, for it is a matter of the utmost indifference to me how many such foes I make."

"I can entertain you in my cabin, and there is an excellent camping-place for your men."

Thus urged the invitation was accepted, and the two officers with Buffalo Bill, were soon after seated in front of the miner's cabin, while their negro servants got supper for them, the campfires of the soldiers glimmering through the trees in the valley a couple of hundred yards away.

"Mr. Dean, our desire is to have a talk with you," said Captain Caruth, when the negroes had departed to the soldiers' camp, and the miner and his guests were alone.

"Yes, gentlemen?"

"We are aware of your splendid service so daringly rendered Buffalo Bill, and through him to the Government in saving the large sum of money of which Paymaster Lennox had been robbed."

"A man would be a cowardly cur indeed, sir, to sit by and see a pack of wolves destroy a man and not go to his aid, no matter what the odds."

"There are men who would take such chances, true, but they are not found every day, and Colonel Dunwoody, commanding this military district, is anxious to show his appreciation in some way of your services."

"Permit me to request that he do so by utterly ignoring anything that I did, Captain Caruth."

"If you feel thus about it, I will say no more, sir, for I can well appreciate how a brave man, acting from a sense of duty, must feel."

"But there is one thing that we are anxious to have you do for us?"

"Certainly, if in my power."

"You are aware that this frontier is cursed by the presence upon it of a band of outlaws known as the Will-o'-the-Wisps?"

"Yes, sir, they attacked my home one night, a year ago."

"Indeed, and robbed you?"

"They only got a little lead, sir, in the place of gold."

"Able you beat them off?"

"I opened fire, sir, from the roof of my cabin, which you see has a log breastwork in front and on the sides, and a ladder runs up along the chimney to a trap in the roof."

"I fired two shots, sir, and they ran off."

"Did you do any damage?"

"As you go down the trail, to-morrow, you will notice two graves under a large pine tree, sir, and therein are buried the two Will-o'-the-Wisps," and the miner spoke with the utmost modesty of his exploit.

Then he added:

"This is a rough country to live in, gentlemen, for a man must sleep with a weapon in his grasp, and be ever ready to take life to save his own."

"But for the fact that I have loved ones I am striving to make a fortune for, I would not remain here a day."

"You have had cause to dread the country, sir; but while you remain here it is the wish of Colonel Dunwoody that you accept the position of Secret Service man for him."

"In other words, become the detective, the spy upon the movements of the Will-o'-the-Wisps, and endeavor to gain some clew by which they can be cornered and captured."

"I understand, sir."

"I may remark, incidentally, sir, that the pay is one hundred dollars per month, and I will leave with you a good horse, and arrange with you regarding your reports to headquarters."

"I certainly hope you will not refuse, Mr. Dean."

"Permit me also to urge your acceptance of the offer," said Surgeon Powell, while Buffalo Bill remarked:

"Yes, Deadshot, you are just the man we want in this place, so do not refuse."

"I shall accept," was the prompt response of the miner.

CHAPTER XIV.

BONNIE BELLE.

THE prompt acceptance of the miner of the dangerous work before him, as border detective, pleased the two officers and Buffalo Bill greatly.

They felt that they had, at one of the scenes best calculated to secure data regarding all lawless characters, one who would faithfully perform his duties, and as fearlessly.

They talked over what he was expected to do until late into the night and then retired to their blanket beds.

The next morning the command moved on into Pocket City in Yellow Dust Valley.

The news of the affair near Deadshot Dean's cabin had become known from one end of the valley to the other, but the only story told was how the miner had interfered and aided Silk Lasso Sam to escape from several men who had him a prisoner, the robber having not long before killed and robbed a United States Paymaster.

Deadshot Dean had taken the men at disadvantage and killing Powder Face Pete had wounded the two others with him, the report went.

That there were over a dozen of them along had not been told, the two wounded men alone claiming to have been present.

That the miners did not once go out to "investigate" the miner was because they were glad, as a whole, to get rid of Powder Face Pete and to have his two comrades laid by for a while.

Of course they must know why Deadshot Dean had set the outlaw free, but they would hold him on that charge some day when he came into Pocket City.

All the while, however, there was a secret plot going on against the miner, rumors being heard about that he must be one of the band of outlaws, to have rescued the chief.

Then it was overheard that he could not possibly have believed the prisoner to have been Buffalo Bill, but only claimed that he was to set him free.

This undercurrent mode of slander was plotting evil against Carroll Dean, when suddenly there rode into the mining valley none other than Buffalo Bill, guiding a party of cavalry.

They went into camp near the tavern known as The Frying Pan, and dinner was ordered for the officers and men.

The idlers and hangers on about the camps cooled down at the sight of the soldiers, and those who had been with the party at Deadshot Dean's cabin the Sunday before made themselves scarce with great alacrity.

The landlord of The Frying Pan was—a woman.

What was more she was postmaster too, and in addition ran The Devil's Den, the combination gambling and drinking saloon in Pocket City.

She kept a good table, had clean beds, and her saloon was separated from the hotel, where she allowed no nonsense.

She kept Chinese servants only, and protected them too from those who sought to bulldoze and harm them.

The Frying Pan was also the headquarters of the stage-line, of which she was the authorized agent.

She was known as Bonnie Belle and she deserved the name, for a more beautiful woman was seldom seen on the frontier, and her face would have made a study for an artist for "innocence," so full of purity it was, with its large, fawn-like eyes and gentle smile.

She had arrived in the coach one day, holding in her lap the head of the former landlord of the Frying Pan, who had been shot by road-agents on the way into Pocket City.

He would have been robbed as well, but suddenly the fair passenger in the coach with him had opened fire upon the robbers, killing one, wounding another and stampeding the others to cover, while she called out to Horseshoe Ned who was on the box:

"Drive over them if they bar your way!"

Horseshoe Ned only wanted half a chance to do that very thing, and laying on the silk he sent his team flying away from the demoralized road-agents and escaped.

Reaching Pocket City it was found that Landlord Lazarus was dying; but he quickly called witnesses about him, made an inventory of his riches, consisting of the hotel, gambling saloon, position as stage agent and postmaster with his horses and all, and made them over to Bonnie Belle, who had served him so well.

What had brought Bonnie Belle to Pocket City no one knew; but she became a heroine at once, and taking hold with a firm hand had matters pretty much her own way as far as her belongings were concerned.

Who she was no one knew, and there had not been yet found in the camps a man with the nerve to question her about herself.

It was at the tavern of Bonnie Belle that the captain put up with his command, and he was welcomed very graciously by the fair hostess, who had only been half a year mistress of The Frying Pan, and was only known to Buffalo Bill of the party.

The scout introduced the officers, who were amazed at finding such a woman in such a place, but greeted her with marked respect, which she seemed to appreciate.

She was dressed in a suit of buckskin, short skirt and leggings, handsomely embroidered and wore a sombrero worked with silver thread, while about her slender waist was a pair of gold-mounted revolvers.

"May I ask, Buffalo Bill, if you were rescued by Miner Deadshot Dean on Sunday last, from three men who claimed to have captured Silk Lasso Sam?" she asked, in the sweetest of voices.

"Yes, I was rescued by Deadshot Dean from

over a dozen cowardly curs who were going to hang me as Silk Lasso Sam," the scout answered.

"Then this nonsense that Deadshot Dean protected Silk Lasso Sam must stop," was the determined reply of the woman, and the sudden change in her face showed that she could be stern at will.

CHAPTER XV.

BONNIE BELLE.

BONNIE BELLE invited her three guests to dine at her table with her, and the invitation was accepted, when they were led into her own private quarters.

They were not surprised to find there every evidence of refinement, for it was just what they expected of such a woman.

There were easy-chairs, a reed lounge with embroidered cushion, books, a guitar and some very fine sketches and paintings upon the walls, scenes about Pocket City, showing that they were the work of her own hands.

At dinner she acted the hostess to perfection, and gave them a most tempting repast, the soldiers at the other tables faring just as well.

She sang for them at Surgeon Powell's request, and her voice was one full of sweetness and sympathy, while her soul seemed to be in her music.

"I cannot see, Miss Bonnie Belle—"

"Do not prefix my name with a *Miss*, Doctor Powell, please, for out here I am called by all Bonnie Belle," she said.

"In Rome do as the Romans do, so Bonnie Belle it shall be," and the doctor bowed.

"Now your question, sir?" she said with a smile.

"I was going to remark, and from no idle curiosity I assure you, Bonnie Belle, that I could not see why you should remain in this wild land?"

"You, sir, are a man of refinement, as is also Captain Caruth, and our friend here, Buffalo Bill, if that is what you mean, and yet you all remain here."

"Very true, for duty calls us here."

"And duty calls *me* here," was the reply, and in a tone so full of sadness that the subject was at once dropped.

"A woman with a history, Powell," said Captain Caruth an hour after, as they rode on their way to the grave of Paymaster Lennox.

"Decidedly, and a beautiful enigma."

"Who is she, Bill?"

"You are too deep for me, Surgeon Powell."

"What do you know of her, Bill?" asked Captain Caruth.

"Next to nothing, sir, more than that she was coming West in a stage with old Landlord Lazarus, who was shot by road-agents when he would not give up his money, and then she opened fire, killing one, wounding another, and when the coach reached Pocket City the man made her his heiress."

"Since then she shot Desperado Keen, who attempted to run the ranch different from her rules, and the men are afraid of her, knowing that she can show her claws, and will, when there is reason to do so."

"What is her name?"

"I never heard any other than Bonnie Belle, sir."

"How old is she, do you think?"

"Guessing at a woman's age, captain, is like betting on a horse-race."

"I should say she was twenty-three or four," Captain Caruth remarked.

"No, she is not a day over twenty-one, if that, Dick," Surgeon Powell said.

"Well, she is a lady born and bred."

"No doubt of that, Dick, and, as I said, a beautiful enigma."

"All women are that, Powell."

"All women are not beautiful, Dick."

"I'll agree with you there, but I meant enigmas."

"I guess you are right, only this one is more so than her sisters."

"I only wish she was at the fort instead of that wild camp."

"Then report about her upon our return and you'll find all the youngsters crazy to be sent on a scout to Pocket City, and some one of them may persuade her to come to the fort as his wife."

"I do not know about that, for my idea is that woman is in love with some fellow whose trail she is on now, and that is why she is here."

"I have the same idea, sir," said Buffalo Bill.

"It seems from her words to you, Cody, that there had been some ugly rumors, afloat about the miner?"

"Yes, captain, and they were started by those fellows whom he stampeded, and their way to get revenge was to have the miners hang him as being in league with Silk Lasso Sam."

"I saw through that at once, sir, and more, did you see that only three, it was claimed, were in the racket?"

"Yes, Powder Face Pete and his two pards who were wounded."

"That was all for sure against the miner, the others who were there starting the rumors."

"It looks so, certainly."

"But Bonnie Belle said that such nonsense should stop, and she meant it," Surgeon Powell remarked.

"She did indeed, for those dove-like eyes of hers flashed like diamonds as she said it too."

"Now to the miner, though."

"Will he be able to do any work as a spy if the people of Pocket City have the slightest idea that he is connected with the outlaws?"

"It will be hard for him, no doubt, but I have great confidence in that man doing all that he undertakes," said Buffalo Bill.

"As I have, and there is another one with a history, whom I may say is an enigma," Surgeon Powell remarked, when Captain Caruth rejoined:

"The woods in this country are full of men of mystery, Frank; in fact the frontier is the place to find them, and if the lives of many were written, how like romance it would all read—What is it, Bill?"

"The grave of Captain Lennox is yonder, sir, up that canyon."

They rode forward more slowly now and a halt was called as they came near a newly made mound.

Dismounting the two officers and scout approached it with uncovered heads and then stood for full a minute.

Then the soldiers were called, a spade and shovel were taken from a pack-horse, with a large roll of canvas and some rope.

The grave was then opened, the body wrapped closely in the canvas and placing it upon one of the pack-horses the trail back to the fort was taken.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE AGED HORSEMAN.

CARROL DEAN saw the soldiers ride away from his cabin with mingled feelings in his breast.

"I have another chance to make money now, and at odd times from my mining work, and though the peril is great I am glad that I accepted the position, for it will get me home that much sooner, and if my mine should fail, enable me to lay up a few more hundreds," he said as he sat musing in front of his cabin.

"Now what is the best way to go about this detective work?"

"I have half a mind to confide in Bonnie Belle, for she always has seemed friendly to me; but then one does not know whom he can trust out here, and the suspicion will come upon me that she is secretly leagued with the Will-o'-the-Wisps."

"If I wrong her I am sorry, but I certainly saw her twice meet Powder Face Pete in the Hangman's Gulch, and receive from him a letter."

"No, I will not trust her until I am certain she will not prove a traitress, for in spite of her velvety ways she may be a tigress."

"Now to change my mode of living somewhat, and mingle with those wild spirits at Pocket City."

"I will have to gamble too, I suppose, and drink, but a professional gambler and a drunkard I never can become."

After musing for awhile longer Carroll Dean took his way toward his claim.

It was beyond the spur, up in a canyon through which flowed a small stream.

He had "worked" the canyon up to the end at the cliffs, hunting in the stream among the rocks and at the roots of trees for the precious metal, and at last had found streaks in the cliffs into which he had dug with more or less success.

He entered the cavity and began work, carefully sifting the loose earth as he dug it, and when he stopped for his dinner had gathered the largest quantity of golden grains which he had found in many a long day before.

"Buffalo Bill has brought me luck," he said cheerily, and keeping on with his work he only left off when the shadows began to deepen.

"Fully twenty dollars to-day," he said, weighing the tiny grains in his hand, as he started homeward.

As he turned into the trail he came upon a horseman.

He was a man with long iron-gray hair and beard, wore iron-framed spectacles and was dressed rather shabbily, while his horse and outfit were of little value.

"Ho, pard, I'm glad ter meet yer, fer I wants ter know if this be ther trail ter Pocket City?" called out the old man.

"Yes, sir, it is the trail, and Pocket City lies only little over a mile and a half beyond."

"Thankee; but does yer know a man there by ther name o' Peter Swain, for he is my son, and I'm a-hunting his camp, as luck bev gone hard with me of late?"

"No, sir, I do not know such a man; but will you not halt for the night with me?"

"Thankee, no, for I must git on and find Peter."

"It's strange yer don't know him, for be gits acquainted easy, and though some thinks he is a bad lot, he's been a good boy ter me and he's all I has got in ther world now ter love."

"Peter Swain you say his name is?" said Carroll Dean thoughtfully.

"Yas, pard, and yer'd know him if once yer seen him, fer his face looks like a turkey egg with ther powder burn in it, and they does call him Powder Face Pete, I larn."

"Powder Face Pete!"

The miner started as he uttered the words, and his face changed color.

The old man was going to seek his son, one whom he would never find, one who was in his grave, placed there by his hand.

"He's been a good boy to me, and he's all I has got now in the world to love," mused Carroll Dean, repeating the old man's words.

How could he tell him that his boy was dead, slain by him?

No, he could not do so, and so he said nothing about knowing him, and the old man rode on his way toward Pocket City.

This meeting affected the miner greatly, and as he ascended the hill to his cabin he halted by the graves of the two men whom he had killed when they attacked his cabin.

"Oh! the curse of killing one's own kind, even in self-defense," he said, bitterly, as he went on his way.

He did not get his supper, for his usually good appetite was gone.

At last he said:

"I will go on after that old man, and see that he is cared well for at The Frying Pan.

"I will ask Bonnie Belle to give him food and lodgings at my expense, and some money, too.

"Poor old man, how I feel for him."

Closing up his cabin he shouldered his rifle, with which to kill any game that might cross his path on the way to Pocket City, and set out back along the spur, taking a way that was nearer, and which he knew would bring him out into the trail in Hangman's Gulch.

His path led him to a cliff overhanging Hangman's Gulch, and it was a steep climb down this of some sixty feet.

But Carroll Dean halted upon the cliff suddenly, his eyes having become riveted upon something he beheld in the canyon below.

That something was the old man who had left him a short while before, and yet he was not alone.

The one with him was Bonnie Belle, the fair landlady of The Frying Pan, and the two had dismounted from their horses, and were talking earnestly together.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MYSTERIOUS MEETING.

THE miner would not have ordinarily seen anything strange in the meeting of Bonnie Belle and the aged horseman in Hangman's Gulch.

But in this instance he did, for there was hardly a man to be found in the mines who would pass through that place alone.

The trail to Pocket City led around it, around the base of the mountain, not through the canyon, which was a longer distance to the camps.

It seemed hardly probable that an old man would turn from the well-marked trail into the canyon where there was no trace of tracks, without some object in view.

Yet this old man had done so.

And then too there was a young woman alone going through a place where men seldom went, and only then in crowds to hang some unfortunate who was deemed guilty of breaking border laws.

The place was alive with cruel memories, for there had been half a hundred men put to death there.

There were graves by the score to mark the place, and they were scattered about in places according to the humor of those who laid the bodies of the dead away.

There was a scaffold erected there, hewn of heavy logs, with the platform working on hinges beneath, while nailed to the beams were remnants of each lariat, rope or chain which had served as the means of execution.

And on another part was cut the name of each individual hanged there, that is, the name of the victim had been known by when hanged.

How many of those had really been victims, innocent of what accused, was not stated; but where Lynch law tries for a crime the innocent seldom are punished or the guilty escape, as is so frequently the case with the justice of civilization.

A damp, dark, weird place was this same Hangman's Gulch with its ghastly and ghostly memories, a strange trysting place for a young lady to go to meet any one.

Carroll Dean had no dread of the place.

There was not an atom of superstition in his composition, and he often took the short cut that way, whether by day or night, in going to Pocket City.

In fact his was the nearest cabin to the weird spot, within the limit of half a mile, where other miners would not pitch their houses within the circle of a mile of it, or search for claims there as though by common consent.

The miner stood like one spell-bound, looking at the two in the valley for full a minute, before

the idea struck him that he too might be discovered by them.

Then he drew back out of sight and hunting another position crept up to where the edge of the cliff was fringed with bushes.

Through them he peered and was nearer the two in the gulch than before.

But though he could hear the voices he was too far distant to overhear what was being said.

Bonnie Belle looked very handsome in her buckskin riding habit, gauntlet gloves and slouch hat and plume.

Her horse stood near patiently awaiting her, and the saddle was ornamented with silver until it shone gorgeously.

She had a lasso hanging at the horn, and a rifle hung from the cantel, and she knew well how to use both, having proven herself to be a very apt scholar in mastering border accomplishments.

She was switching a bush somewhat viciously as the old man was talking.

He had hitched his horse near and stood before her, but no longer in the half bent attitude he had shown in the saddle when talking to Carroll Dean.

Now he stood upright and his movements were quick and decided, for he paced to and fro near the woman.

"That is no old man," muttered the miner, as he eyed him from head to foot.

"And he is no stranger here."

"Yes, his story to me was false, I am sure, now that I see him here and with Bonnie Belle."

"What can those two have in common, I wonder?"

It was growing dark now, and the two turned toward their horses, the man mounting and riding toward a rock and placing his hand in a crevice of it, while the woman nodded her head, as though understanding his action.

Then she leaped lightly into her saddle and rode rapidly back up the canyon.

The man turned down the canyon, riding within a short distance of the miner.

Carroll Dean watched him until he neared the opening into the trail and saw that he again resumed his bent position in the saddle, his whole attitude changing.

The miner then went upon his way, down the steep path from the cliff, into Hangman's Gulch and thence on the way which Bonnie Belle had gone.

He soon came out upon the trail and just after the aged horseman had gone along, for hearing the sound of hoofs he had hung back out of sight.

"Now to go on to Pocket City and see if I can get at the bottom of that mysterious meeting," he muttered as he turned into the trail to the valley camps.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPY AT WORK.

NIGHTTIME was when Pocket City was in all its glory, if the scenes enacted under cover of the darkness could be so classed.

The miners were then ready for rest, carousals, gambling or spinning yarns, with their ever ready revolvers to settle any disputes.

As has been said The Frying Pan was an orderly house, and Bonnie Belle so kept it.

No saloon being there it was thus not the scene of revels, and a good bed and excellent, well-cooked food could always be obtained.

As hostess of The Frying Pan, Bonnie Belle was always gentle, but firm in her management, and one saw in her almost a different person from the Bonnie Belle of Devil's Den, her gambling and drinking saloon.

She was wont to appear there each night about ten o'clock, remain until midnight, and she always went there dressed in velvet and wearing jewels, while her face it seemed became somewhat hardened in its expression from the contact, and thus she ruled them with a rod of iron.

The bartenders, faro dealer and soon the frequenters of the place seemed to stand in awe of her when she visited Devil's Den.

"Nomatter how wild the orgie, how boisterous the men, when she came into the room there followed a hush and all seemed subdued."

She had checked a dozen rows by simply commanding a cessation of hostilities, and if appealed to, as she was almost invariably, to settle a dispute, she decided with impartial justice and her decision was final.

On this account she was often called "Justice" by the miners.

Devil's Den stood against an overhanging cliff, and a high stockade wall ran from the rear of it around the spur to The Frying Pan, which gave Bonnie Belle an opportunity to travel the three hundred yards between the hotel and the gambling-saloon under cover.

The back of the hotel was also against the overhanging ridge, and the wing in which Bonnie Belle had her quarters was cut off by a stockade fence, forming a yard where innumerable wild flowers and trees had been planted.

There was a spring there, a rustic arbor and all to make the quarters and their surroundings as pleasant as possible.

Devil's Den was a very spacious building, built of logs and tough boards and with a bar across the rear end, a faro table upon either side, a couple of other chance games and then a score of small tables for from two to half a dozen players.

Bonnie Belle was not as grasping as a landlord might have been, and she therefore sold no bad liquor nor cabbage leaf cigars, but furnished a fair equivalent for the money.

She aided the needy, was a good nurse to any one who was ill, and sent from The Fryingpan any delicacy that she could prepare to tempt their appetite.

When Miner Carroll Dean arrived at the hotel, he decided to take supper there, and seeing Bonnie Belle, asked if it was too late to get a meal.

"It is never too late, Mr. Dean, to get anything to eat in my house," was the smiling answer, and supper was ordered.

Carroll Dean was anxious to have a talk with Bonnie Belle, so was glad to see that she did not avoid him.

"I saw some soldiers on the way to Pocket City, Bonnie Belle," he said as a means of starting the conversation.

"Yes, they put up with me, and I learned of your rescue of Buffalo Bill last Sunday."

"Did you learn the truth?"

"Perhaps not, but I was sure that you were in the right."

"I saw the scout in the hands of Powder Face Pete, and a dozen of the gang that so often are seen at his heels."

"They claimed to have captured Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw, but I knew that their prisoner was Buffalo Bill, for I had met him, and recognized him."

"They declined to give him up, and I was forced to kill Powder Face Pete and wound two others to get the scout free."

"There were a dozen, you say?"

"More than that, Bonnie Belle."

"Do you know any of the men?"

"Every one of them."

"Then look out for them, Deadshot Dean," was the significant reply.

"Thank you; but now let me ask if you have seen an old gray-haired and bearded man who seems to be in hard luck?"

"There is such a man here who came half an hour ago."

"Do you know who he is?"

"He gave his name as Peter Swain, and said that he was here to search for his son."

"I saw him, as he passed my cabin, and offered him shelter, but he said that he must come on."

"His son, he told me, was Powder Face Pete, and being in hard luck, he had come here to look him up and get help."

"Of course, having killed his son, I felt sorry for him, and I came here to-night to ask you to give him several weeks' board at my expense, and also, say a hundred dollars in cash, from me, only he need not know where it comes from."

Bonnie Belle turned her eyes full upon the miner.

Then she said, speaking very slowly:

"Deadshot Dean, you are too true a man to live in this wicked community, and I hope you will strike it rich very soon, and go away, for I suppose you have a home to go to?"

"Oh, yes, Bonnie Belle, and those there whom I dearly love; but is this old man here now?"

"Yes, I gave him a pleasant room and some supper."

"Does he know of his son's death?"

"Yes, for I told him, and the miners are going to make up a purse for him."

"Then put in my hundred, Bonnie Belle," and Deadshot Dean handed over his buckskin bag of gold-dust.

"Thank you, I will, and I will urge him to leave the mines at once; but here he comes, now," and as Bonnie Belle spoke the old man came slowly toward them.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SECRET TO FATHOM.

THE old man came toward Bonnie Belle and Deadshot Dean with halting step and bent form.

"Ah, lady, your supper was tempting to me, but my appetite was gone with the tidings you gave me of the death of my son, his cruel murder by the hand of a cowardly assassin," said the old man in a trembling voice.

Deadshot Dean started at these words, and bit his lips nervously, while he turned his gaze upon Bonnie Belle in a pleading way.

"No, sir, let me tell you how it was; but do you not recollect this gentleman, whom you met on your way here?" and she turned to the miner, who said:

"You passed my cabin and I directed you how to reach Pocket City."

"I hope you did not miss the trail."

"Yes, I remember you now, but my eyes are dim, for I am getting old you see."

"No, the trail was broad and I followed it without a miss, and I was directed to come to this good lady's house and she has cared for me, and she also it was who told me of my good boy's murder."

"No, no, I did not say he was murdered, for he it was who brought his death upon himself, as he had captured the noted scout Buffalo Bill and intended to hang him as Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw chief of the road-agents known as the Will-o'-the-Wisps."

"A miner interfered, recognizing the scout, and your son attacked him with others who were with him."

"Ah! that was it, was it?"

"Well, I always said poor Pete would die with his boots on; but you, sir, will you not go with me to my son's grave, for see, the moonlight makes it as light as day and I could sleep better once I saw poor Pete's last resting place."

"You will go with me, will you not?"

Bonnie Belle had not given a hint that the miner who had killed Powder Face Pete was Deadshot Dean; but she did not appear to have anticipated such a request as to have the man who had killed the desperado go to his grave with the father of the dead man.

She glanced quickly at the miner and said:

"No, Mr. Swain, I will accompany you to your son's grave, to-night if you insist upon going."

"On the contrary, Bonnie Belle, I will go with Mr. Swain," was the unexpected response of the miner.

"But do you know the grave?" asked Bonnie Belle with intense surprise.

"Oh, yes, he was buried in Angels' Row, I heard from a miner who was at the burial."

"How good of them to bury him in Angels' Row," said the old man, little dreaming that the row was so named in contradiction of the real character of those placed there, for those buried in Angels' Row were the worst devils of the community.

"Do you really insist upon going to-night, Mr. Swain?" asked Bonnie Belle.

"Oh yes, for I cannot sleep until I see my son's grave."

"And do you insist, Deadshot Dean, in going with Mr. Swain?"

"Certainly, as he wishes it," was the response.

"Then I am ready, sir, as soon as I have gotten my supper," was the cool reply, and the miner went in to supper, which a Chinee servant had just announced with:

"'Merican man come eatee."

Whatever Deadshot Dean had lost his appetite for, after just meeting the old man at his cabin, the cause was removed upon sitting down to one of Bonnie Belle's good suppers, which tempted him to eat heartily.

Then he came out and joined the old man and Bonnie Belle, whom he saw talking earnestly together, but whose manner changed when they saw him approaching.

"I am ready, sir," said Deadshot Dean politely.

"I'll be with yer at once," and the two walked away together, the old man going with a tread as though it was hard for him to walk.

But the miner recalled how he had seen him move in the Hangman's Gulch, and so kept a brisk step purposely, watching his every movement.

The way led up on the ridge back of the hotel and camps, and by a winding trail.

It was all of half a mile before the miner halted upon the summit of the ridge, in the midst of a number of headstones and boards marking the last resting place of those who had died in Pocket City, or more properly perhaps been killed there, for nearly all of those lying in that village of the dead, had died with their boots on, if not shot on purpose in some personal encounter, killed by accident in some free fight, a state of affairs so common in Gold Dust Valley as to cause Bonnie Belle to wittily remark that she would as soon be killed on purpose as by accident, as the result was about the same.

To one row of graves apart from the others Deadshot Dean led the old man, and said:

"This is Angels' Row, and the newest made grave is that of your son."

"There it is, sir."

The moon shone brightly down upon the row of graves and the fresh earth readily marked the one where Powder Face Pete lay.

With a moan the old man sunk down by the mound and rocked to and fro in deepest grief, the miner watching him closely the while.

When at last they turned away and retraced their steps toward The Frying Pan, Deadshot Dean muttered to himself:

"The old man is a fraud I am sure, and he and Bonnie Belle are allied in some plot without doubt."

"That plot I must know."

about this secret alliance between the fair Bonnie Belle and the man whom he had now regarded as a fraud.

He was sure that the man was not a stranger to Pocket City, for he had caught him quite cleverly on the way up to the burying-ground by allowing him to lead at times, though not appearing to do so, and in each instance where a trail had branched off he had taken the right one.

The way of the miner homeward lay around the spur and past the Devil's Den.

He had not intended entering there that night, but hearing laughter and loud voices decided to go in.

Quietly entering the door he sought a seat in an obscure corner and viewed the scene.

It was then eleven o'clock and the place was in full blast.

Glasses were clinking, the atmosphere was dense with smoke, for nine out of every ten men was smoking, and profanity, boisterous laughter and loud talking made the place a perfect pandemonium.

The miner glanced about for Bonnie Belle, but she had not yet put in an appearance on her rounds.

Walking over to the faro bank the miner stood watching the players for awhile and then calmly put down a ten dollar bill upon a card.

He won on the next deal, and without a miss kept in luck until he had won five hundred dollars.

The miners about him were surprised, for he had never known to play before.

Just as another winning was handed over to him Bonnie Belle came in from the rear of the saloon, the door back of the bar.

She wore a dark-blue velvet dress, which fitted her form to perfection, and it was trimmed with gold lace and brass buttons, a sombrero richly embroidered in gold thread adorned her head, and a sash about her waist held her revolvers.

If she saw the miner Deadshot Dean she did not notice him, but coming forward, while instantly a hush fell upon the place, she said in her full rich voice:

"My pards, I have something to say to you, if you will bear me."

The silence was intense, money and glasses no longer clinked, every hat was doffed, every voice stilled, and the hush was an answer to her wish to be heard.

"I wish to say to you, my pards, that an old man came into the valley to-night, one whom I believe to be in distress."

"He was poorly mounted, poorly equipped and had but a few dollars in money he told me."

"Luck has been against him of late, his years are many, and he came to Pocket City to find his son and ask his aid."

Last Sunday his son was killed, and the news of his death I broke to him as gently as I could, and already has he been under the guidance of a kind miner to visit the grave of that son.

"I did not disguise from him the fact that his son was in the wrong, that he, with others, had ambushed and captured Buffalo Bill the noted scout, and intended hanging him under belief that it was Silk Lasso Sam."

"We all know what a calamity such an act would have been for Gold Dust Valley and all in it, and the miner deserves our thanks for saving us from it."

"But it were Silk Lasso Sam," called out a voice.

"It was not, for Buffalo Bill and a number of soldiers were here yesterday, and from the scout's own lips I had the truth of the affair, and I warn those who are plotting mischief against the miner who rescued him, claiming that he aided an outlaw, that they must desist or take the consequences."

As Bonnie Belle cast her eyes over the crowd there were some present who moved nervously and eyes met eyes all over the room.

But not a voice was raised in reply, and Bonnie Belle continued:

"But now to this old man, who came here only to find his son dead."

"He does not wish to remain among strangers, and that he may go East to find friends, I have decided to raise a purse for him."

"One generous miner has already placed in my hands a most liberal gift, the sum of which I will not name, as I do not wish to influence your offerings."

"But I will pass around my sombrero, and I wish you, my pards, to give what you can."

A cheer greeted the words of the woman, and then followed special calls from many voices:

"Pass her round, Bonnie Belle."

"Throw in the dust, men."

"Pards, don't be mean."

"Bonnie Belle holds the hat, pards, so give yer dust freely."

"Now set the pace, Bonnie Belle, and we'll keep up with the procession."

In the midst of these cries the old man himself had come into the saloon, and spying him and feeling that he was the man, as he was a stranger, a voice called out:

"There's the old pilgrim now, pards, so three cheers for Powder Face Pete's old dad."

Whatever the feeling had been for Powder Face Pete, and the delight that he had been called away, the white hair of the old man commanded respect and the cheers were given with a will.

"God bless you, boys," murmured the old man while Bonnie Belle came toward him with her own and another sombrero full of money, for the contribution had been most liberal.

"Thankee, lady, thankee, boys."

"Now I kin give the tiger a turn," and the old man pocketing his donation quickly stepped up to the faro bank and laid down a handfull of money upon the ace of hearts.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE AGED GAMBLER.

AMONG the first whom Bonnie Belle faced when she was passing around her sombrero for contributions for old Swain, was Deadshot Dean.

She started at seeing him, his presence there evidently being a surprise to her.

"You have given far more than your share, Deadshot Dean, so I pass you by," she said quietly.

"Pardon me, no, for I desire to contribute again, having just been a large winner at faro," he said.

"You a winner?"

"Yes."

"I did not know that you played cards?"

"Oh, yes, but I never gambled before."

"It is unfortunate, then, that you did not lose, as this may cause you to gamble again."

"Perhaps, but here is my contribution for the old man," and he tossed a twenty-dollar bill into the hat.

The woman passed on with a strange look upon her face, one Deadshot Dean could not fathom.

Here it was a handful of gold-dust from one, then a dozen silver dollars from another, next a buckskin bag of golden grains, again a bank-note, to be followed with a gold piece, and so on until the hat became heavy, and calling a man near her to take it and lend her his, she went on her rounds.

"No, Barney, you are in ill luck yourself, so I'll chip in for you," she said as a sickly-looking man held out a dollar.

Then she added:

"Come take your meals at The Frying Pan for a couple of weeks on my invitation, and you may build up."

"Bless you, Bonnie Belle," were the low-uttered words, and tears came into the man's eyes.

To another, an evil-faced man, who affected to be a miner dandy in dress, she said:

"Thorny, you chip in generously."

"Come, no nonsense, for you are well able, and have won heavily of late."

"Come, nothing less than a hundred will I take from you."

"A hundred devils!" growled the man.

"No, a hundred dollars."

"Put it in, or never darken the door of my house again."

"This is robbery," and the man drew some money from his pocket.

"If so, it is in a good cause."

"If you were in need to-morrow I'd do as much for you, so put in your money."

"There's fifty."

"I said a hundred."

"Then here goes," and the money was thrown in, while the woman, with a triumphant smile passed on.

"That's the first time Thorny ever give a dollar ter charity, I'll bet," said a miner near.

"Yas, but Bonnie Belle gits 'em all," remarked one near.

At last she had gone the rounds of the saloon and having kept a rapid calculation, or nearly as she was able to do so, of what had been put in she said:

"Here, Mr. Swain, there are about twelve hundred dollars in these two hats, and I am glad to say a very liberal contribution for you."

"I am more than thankful, Bonnie Belle," was the response, and then followed the words that closed the last chapter:

"Now I kin give the tiger a turn."

The crowd were momentarily paralyzed at the words of the old man if I may use the expression.

They looked at him, as he advanced toward the table, and then from one to the other, and when they saw him cover the ace of hearts with his money, fully fifty dollars, there arose a shout of admiration mingled with laughter, and cries of:

"Go in ter clip the tiger's claws, old man."

"Pull the financial tail clean out of him, daddy."

"Clip his ears, old pilgrim."

"Break the bank, grandpa."

"Waal, now, you hev got the cheek o' a Government mule and no mistake."

"He's Powder Face Pete's dad, that's sartain."

"Of all old Methusalahs I ever seen he takes the premium."

CHAPTER XX.

BORDER CHARITY.

ARRIVING at the door of The Frying Pan, Deadshot Dean parted with the old man and started on his lonely walk back to his cabin.

He was in deep meditation, for he was worried

Such were the cries that went the rounds until the old man having lost a hundred dollars turned away from the faro bank with a look of disgust.

"Maybe that's somebody w'u'd like ter play me!" he said glancing unabashed over the crowd.

"I don't mind gettin' my hundred back ag'in," said the man Thony, and the crowd cheered.

They sat down to a table and the old man drew from one of his many and capacious pockets an old deck of cards.

"Give us a new deck, Bottles," cried Thony.

"Oh, no, yer don't ring in no marked keerds on me," cried the old man, and the crowd laughed.

"These keerds is good enough ef they be a little worn: but they is honest keerds, and ef yer don't play with them then I sets yer down as one who don't play fair."

"I'll go yer, old man, with any cards, so name yer limit."

"I bain't got none, fer ef I loses, I'll git the pretty girl ter pass ther hat around ag'in."

"Call it a hundred."

"I'm yer man."

The game was begun and the old man won.

Again they played and it was with the same result.

The third game was of the same kind, and the crowd was with the gray hairs in sympathy, for they cheered him all the while.

At last the miner Thony had lost a thousand dollars, and rising from the table said:

"I believe you are a cheat, old man."

"Prove it and let ther boys hang me," was the quiet remark, and pocketing his money he left the saloon, went to The Frying Pan's stables and mounting rode back upon the trail he had come.

But there was one watching him, from the moment he saw him enter the Devil's Den, who never lost sight of him until he rode away from The Frying Pan, when he ran on ahead of him upon the trail he had taken.

CHAPTER XXII.

ILL-GOTTEN GAINS.

THE old man rode away from The Frying Pan slowly.

Before going he had seen Bonnie Belle for a few minutes and this had not escaped the eyes of the spy upon his actions.

He waited until he had gotten away from the camps and then urged his horse forward at a pace which the animal had hardly seemed capable of going.

He no longer rode bent in his saddle and like an old man.

As he neared the entrance to Hangman's Gulch he drew rein.

The moon peered through the foliage here and there, lighting up the trail, but it did not reveal a form crouching by the roadside.

On came the horseman, to suddenly behold a dark object rise before him, run his arm up through the bridle-rein of his horse and level a rifle full at his heart.

The old man was taken completely aback.

He did not offer resistance for he was too fairly caught to attempt it.

"Hold, old man, for I wants a few words with you," said the man who had so quickly and successfully brought him to a halt.

"Who are you?"

The voice was no longer feeble with age, but stern and ringing now.

"I'm ther pard o' ther man you cheated at cards to-night."

"Who says I cheated?"

"I does."

"You lie!"

"Oh no, your keerds was marked and yer cheated Thony out o' his money, so hand it over or I takes you back and hands yer over to ther boys and old as yer is they'll hang yer, thinking they is doing yer a favor ter save yer ther trouble o' dying."

"You would rob me?"

"I wants that money, and it's in yer left pocket."

"You must have watched me very closely."

"Oh, I did, and I wants that pack o' keerds fer luck."

"If I refuse?"

"I'll take yer back to ther boys."

"Curse you, here's your money."

"Hold on, yer might hev a gun in that pocket too, so I'll just git it myself."

Then the man disarmed the old fellow, after which he took the money from his pocket.

"Now you are satisfied, I hope?" queried the old man.

"Oh no I bain't, for yer as much as stole that money was raised for yer, and I wants it too, for there's a dozen poor fellers in ther mines as is deserving, and it would help them along mighty."

"You are going to rob me of all I have then?"

"Oh, yes, for it's a case o' dog eat dog, yer know."

"Come, I wants all ther contribution yer got ter-night."

The old man cursed bitterly, pleaded and became savage again.

But all to no use, for he had to give up his ill-gotten gains.

He could not tell who the man was who held him up, for he had a handkerchief stretched over his face with holes cut in it to see through.

He saw that he could do nothing but yield, but as the man robbed him he suddenly said:

"Here is money yer didn't git ther ter-night, so I hands it back to yer, and I doesn't want yer watch and chain, and ther diamonds yer wears."

"It's a queer beggar you is ter wear a fine watch and a diamond, but as yer didn't steal 'em in Pocket City, yer kin keep 'em."

"You are very kind," sneered the old man.

"Oh, yes, I means ter be just as well as generous."

"Now I'm going ter place yer belt o' arms right here in ther trail while you rides on until yer counts a hundred."

"Then turn back and come and git 'em, only yer won't find me here."

"I doesn't wish ter send yer unarmed through ther country."

"Thank you," sneered the old man.

"Now, go."

As he spoke the masked man placed the belt of arms in the trail, and the horseman rode on.

He counted a hundred very rapidly, turned and rode back to the spot where he had been held up.

Quickly he dismounted and seized his weapons, leaped into the saddle again and dashed away.

He did not see or hear the man who had robbed him.

But that individual saw him, and muttered to himself:

"That leap into the saddle was the act of an athlete."

"Yes, he is no old man, even."

Then the man took his handkerchief from his face and walked on up Hangman's Gulch.

He passed on to the secret path up the cliff-side, took the trail then along the ridge, and halted only when he reached the door of Deadshot Dean's cabin.

Unlocking it he entered, closed and barred the door behind him, and then struck a light.

The light revealed that the robber of the horseman was none other than Deadshot Dean himself.

He took from his pocket the money he had gotten, in gold, dust, silver and gold coin and bills, and spread it out upon the table.

"One hundred and twenty dollars of this I gave him, so that I take back again."

"Thony's money was won by cheating at cards, for I have seen him cheat, so that I will not give back, but put with the other to go to charity."

"Let me see, here are about two thousand dollars, or its equivalent, which I will turn over for the poor sick miners in the camps, for they need it, and that man is no more old than I am, and is an impostor."

"What his game is I do not know, but I shall fathom it I feel certain by keeping my eye upon Bonnie Belle."

"Well, Carroll Dean, you are coming out, for you are detective, spy, gambler and road-agent all within twenty-four hours."

"But thank Heaven I robbed a robber and am not tempted to take a dollar for my own use, except that which I won to-night, and by the laws that govern betting that is honestly mine."

"Now for some rest," and throwing himself upon his cot he was soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS TRAIL.

THE sun was well above the horizon the next morning, when Deadshot Dean arose from his cot.

He cooked his breakfast, hid away his own money, and that which he had taken from old Swain, and then started down the valley where he had left the horseman during the night.

His life as a miner and upon the frontier had made him a good trailer, and he at once started off on the tracks of the horse ridden by old Swain.

He saw that he had halted at the path leading to his cabin, and the tracks showed that the horse had stood there for a few minutes at least.

"Yes, he doubtless dismounted and went up to my cabin, but finding all quiet went on his way again, anxious not to have daylight find him in this vicinity."

"I wonder if he suspected me of being the one to hold him up."

"I hardly think so."

"Now to see where his trail will lead me."

He followed along on foot at a good swinging step that cast behind him four miles an hour, and kept it up for several hours.

He had no difficulty following the trail and halted only for a short rest and dinner.

That he was well hardened for work was shown by the springy step he kept up when again starting upon his way.

He did not halt again for some three hours, and though not mounted was putting the miles behind him at a good pace.

What caused him then to halt was at finding the tracks he was following turn sharp off from the trail between Pioneer Post and Pocket City.

He turned off on the trail at once, and followed on up into a wild and rugged canyon for a mile or more.

Then it widened into a valley, fed by mountain streams and with rich meadow lands in which were traces of several horses having lately been feeding.

Up against the rocks were the remains of a camp-fire, the ashes still warm, and there had evidently been a camp for a couple or more days.

A close search revealed that there had been three horses staked out there and a couple of men had been camping at the place, for there was a wicky-up just large enough to shelter two.

The tracks of the horse he followed led directly to this camp, and Carroll Dean also made note of the fact that the same animal had left the place to go down toward the mining-camps, the trail being a day or so older than the one coming back.

For some time the miner pondered over the situation and then he decided to camp there all night.

He built up the fire, put his blankets under the shelter and after eating supper sat down for a quiet smoke in the gathering darkness.

"I think I see the intention," he muttered.

"That man came here with two or three men, doubtless only two, and while they camped in the canyon he went on to the mining-camps for some purpose.

"Then he returned here and the party went on their way, wherever that is."

"Now, who was that man, and who were his followers?"

"I noticed that his hands did not look like those of an old man, and if his hair and beard were real then he is prematurely gray."

"I can go on to-morrow following the trail, for it will be easier with four horses to follow than one."

"I dislike to go so far from my cabin, but then I am embarked in this detective work and must carry it through."

"If I could run these Will-o'-the-Wisps to earth it would be a fortune in my pocket, that is certain, and a good service done."

"Then too I would like to repay the confidence placed in me in that way, by those gallant army officers and that splendid fellow Buffalo Bill."

"Well, I am tired, and have a hard day's tramp before me to-morrow, so I will turn in."

With this he sought his blankets and was soon fast asleep.

But at dawn he was up and had breakfast, so pushed on his way once more now following the trail of the four horses.

He had gone but a few miles when he saw a horse feeding ahead of him upon the trail.

The animal had no saddle or bridle on, only a stake rope which had caught in some bushes and held him fast.

"It is the horse of the old man, and he has gotten away from him in the night, I suppose."

"He is thin, but a fine animal, so I will be glad to have the use of him."

He went up to the horse now and soon had his blankets made into a temporary saddle and the stake rope into a bridle.

Then he gave the animal rein and set off on the trail as before.

"If this horse could only talk, what could he not tell me?" he muttered.

With a halt at noon of an hour he once more renewed his way to suddenly come to a broad, well-traveled stage trail.

There was the track of a coach having lately passed that way, going westward, but the trail he followed of these horses now, went eastward.

On he pushed, now and then catching sight of the tracks not obliterated by the coach, until suddenly he heard the rapid clatter of hoofs.

Instantly he rode into the shelter of some bushes and waited ready to greet friend or foe.

On came the horseman, for there was but one, and he was riding like the wind.

A moment more and he dashed around a course in the trail and from the lips of the miner broke a cry, followed by the words:

"It is Buffalo Bill!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TWO TRACKERS.

BUFFALO BILL drew rein quickly, and the miner noted that the scout was riding with his reins held taut in his left hand, while in his right he carried his revolver for instant use.

There was something going wrong for the scout to be riding thus fast upon the stage trail and prepared to give battle in a second of time.

"What! my gallant rescuer, it is you?" cried Buffalo Bill, as he saw the miner ride out of his place of concealment.

"Yes, friend Cody, and I have just struck

the stage road while following a most mysterious trail."

"Ah! the Will-o'-the-Wisps I'll wager high on; but how about that gothic steed of yours keeping up upon a run, for though an animal of fine points he does not look like a racer and long stayer."

"Yes, and your equipments are not according to army regulations."

The miner laughed at the scout's criticism of his horse and outfit and said:

"I started on the trail on foot, and overtook this horse upon the way."

"But let me tell you in a few words, just what I have to report so that I may go back to my cabin."

"Certainly, I can spare the time, as I suppose I can be of little service now in overtaking the stage."

"Has anything gone wrong?"

"Yes, the coach was attacked two miles up the trail, and what happened to the driver and his passengers I do not know, or that they were robbed or not."

"But there is a dead outlaw lying in the trail back at the scene, and there seems to have been a hot fight, for a horse is also dead there and another wounded."

"I had started upon a scout along the coach trail, as Horseshoe Ned the regular driver is laid up this run, and a new man is in his place."

"I came out into the trail beyond where the hold up was and heard distant firing."

"From the rocks coming echoes I could not at first ascertain whether the firing was up or down the trail."

"But I saw that the coach had passed the point where I was and so rode in this direction."

"Coming upon the scene, after a ride of a couple of miles, I found the dead outlaw as I said, a dead and a wounded horse."

"How many passengers there were in the coach I do not of course know, but some of them had the nerve to resist robbery and they called in the chips of one of the road-agents."

"What damage the people of the coach sustained I cannot find out until I overhaul it."

"The outlaw had been robbed by his fellows, I judge, for they were gone, though in my hurry to overtake the coach I could not take time to find their retreating trail."

"If it was the party I followed, there were but three of them."

"And one dead?"

"Oh! how I would have liked to have come upon that scene, for I am sure I could have caused the Will-o'-the-Wisps to have to recruit their forces."

"I only wish that you had, or that I had been a little earlier on the scene, as I might have prevented a tragedy at least."

"But, as you are going on after the coach, can I not ride on to the scene of the hold-up and find the trail, leaving you a line about what I discover, so as to save you time, as I suppose you will return?"

"Certainly, as soon as I have overtaken the coach and get what information I can."

"It is a rough road ahead for wheels, for miles, so I can overtake it readily, and if you will only get what points you can and leave me word, I will feel obliged, while I may get back before you leave."

"Perhaps so."

"Now make your report please, Pard Dean, in case I do not see you soon again."

"I will tell you just what has happened and leave you to be the judge of what the situation is."

"Fire away."

Carroll Dean then made known to Buffalo Bill the fact of the old horseman coming by his cabin, and how going on to the valley he had discovered him in Hangman's Gulch, talking with Bonnie Belle.

How we had again met him at The Frying Pan, and neither the woman or the stranger had spoken of the meeting in Hangman's Gulch, his going as his guide to Powder Face Pete's grave, and the scene in the gambling saloon of the Devil's Den that night, he also made known.

"You're a dandy from 'Wayback, pard," said Buffalo Bill, gratified at having the right man in the position of spy at Pocket City.

But when Deadshot Dean told of how he had held up the old man on the trail, the scout laughed heartily.

"Now my one hundred and twenty dollars I got back, and the balance I shall devote to charity, and as I robbed a robber I do not feel that I did wrong," said the miner in conclusion.

"Indeed you did not; but it was his trail you followed here?"

"Yes, with the two others whom he had waiting for him in the little camp."

"Now, what is your opinion of the whole affair, Scout Cody?"

CHAPTER XXV.

OF THE SAME OPINION.

The scout did not answer the miner for full a minute.

Then he asked:

"Have you formed your opinion?"

"I have."

"Then I will give you mine."

"It will reveal how near we are together."

"Yes."

"And I am pretty sure you will regard the situation as I do."

"Maybe."

"But now tell me about this woman?"

"Well?"

"She was dismounted in the Hangman's Gulch?"

"Yes."

"And the old man was, also?"

"Yes."

"And do you think he was an old man?"

"Only in appearance."

"And the woman, Bessie Belle, raised the money for him?"

"She did."

"Which he began to risk in gambling?"

"Yes."

"He had gigantic cheek, I take it."

"Yes, it was so repulsive that the miners were displeased with him."

"I don't wonder, when the recipient of a purse, who was poor and in distress over the death of his son, could turn with the money thus received to the gambling table."

"And though he lost at faro, he won from Thorne, but by marked cards, for though the man he played with is a cheat he never suspected the old man and kept playing, hoping that luck would change, and he could get a chance at the old man's contributions."

"I see; and you got it all?"

"Every dollar they gave him and all that he won from Thorne."

"Well, you held trumps in that game, sure."

"Yes, six of them," was the significant response as the man touched his revolver.

"That is a hand to win with if played with skill and discretion," laughed the scout.

Then he continued talking slowly:

"My opinion is just this:

"That man was either Silk Lasso Sam, or one of his men; more than likely, from his nerve, the chief himself."

"Powder Face Pete may or may not have been the man's son, and if he was the chief, he was not his son, for Silk Lasso Sam is a young man."

"The girl is the ally of the Will-o'-the-Wisps above all doubt, but she must not know, or have the slightest idea that we suspect her."

"No, indeed."

"The man you followed did have men waiting for him, and the girl doubtless gave him some news about some one coming out on the coach which we do not know of, and they headed it off to get what money they could lay hands upon."

"Now you have my opinion, Pard Dean."

"And it is the same as my own."

"Good!"

"Now, while I go on and overtake the coach, you push back and hunt up the trail the outlaws retreated by."

"Then get back to Pocket City as soon as you can, for I have an idea that Silk Lasso Sam will be captured through that girl."

"I may be wrong, but she will be the one to keep your eye open."

"So I think."

"Now go slow, and don't run yourself into trouble or too great danger, for I cannot afford to lose you, and I have perfect faith, as has Colonel Dunwoody, after what Captain Caruth and Surgeon Powell told him of you, that you are the right man in the right place."

"Now I am off."

With a grasp of the hand the scout was away, once more riding like the wind.

Then Carroll Dean mounted his horse and rode back on the trail of the coach.

A ride of a mile brought him to a spot the very scene for a hold-up of a coach by road-agents.

It was where the trail ran through high cliffs, and went down a steep hill into a stream, then up a sharp ascent to the plateau above.

It was a favorite watering place of the drivers, the water being clear, cool and knee-deep.

With men upon the cliffs commanding the coach, and one ahead in the trail to halt it, the road-agents at that point would have every advantage.

Yet it seemed that some one in the coach had shown nerve enough to resist, and had killed one outlaw at least.

The miner beheld a dead horse lying in the trail, and the tracks showed that the driver had driven over the body, being unable to get around in the narrow road.

Not far from the horse, at the base of the cliff, as though he had been shot while bending over and fell from it, was the body of a man.

He was an evil-faced fellow, tall and gaunt, and his pockets had been turned inside out, and his belt of arms taken.

His comrades had either been driven off, or did not have the humanity to bury him.

Lying across the stream was a wounded horse, and seeing that he was fatally hurt, the miner quickly put him out of his sufferings with a pistol-shot.

The horse had on a fine bridle, saddle and blanket and these were at once appropriated by

the miner, who then began the search for the trail left by the outlaws in their retreat, while he placed his horse where he could feed while resting.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE VOLUNTEER DRIVER.

WHEN Buffalo Bill left Deadshot Dean he rode rapidly to make up for lost time.

The trail was rough and dangerous at places, but he eased his horse over like the skillful rider that he was.

The miles flew behind him rapidly until in an hour he had gained so much on the coach that halting to listen he could hear the distant rumble of the wheels ahead.

Another half-hour and he saw the red coach flashing in the sunlight as it moved along the foliage-clad trail.

"That is not Ribbons on the box, and it is certainly not Horseshoe Ned, for I am sure that he did not come out on this run," he said as he saw a stranger on the box.

"Well, he drives like an expert, and is sending the horses along at a slapping pace."

"Come, old fellow, stretch your legs at a better rate if you wish to overtake that train soon."

So saying the scout touched his spurs to the flanks of his horse and away the animal bounded with increased speed.

The clatter of the hoofs behind then caught the ears of the driver and he turned his head quickly.

A moment more and he had drawn rein, seized his rifle from alongside of him upon the box and stood like a man at bay.

"Ho, he shows fight, taking me for an outlaw, I guess, for he is a stranger in these parts."

So saying the scout rode forward at a walk, while he raised his hands above his head in token of peaceful intention.

As Buffalo Bill approached he eyed the stranger upon the box closely, and muttered:

"The driver has been killed, that fellow is a tenderfoot and will fill me full of lead if I don't go slow."

The man on the box was dressed in a suit of stylish, dark-gray clothes, and wore a black slouch hat.

He wore no mustache or beard, was a handsome man, scarcely thirty, and had the look of one who would be a dangerous foe if aroused.

"Ho, pard, I am no enemy, so put up your gun and we'll get acquainted," said Buffalo Bill.

"Who are you?" asked the stranger on the box.

"Chief of Scouts at Pioneer Post and I am known as Buffalo Bill."

"Buffalo Bill!"

"How much have I heard and read of you."

"But how am I to know that you are telling me the truth, for one knows not who to trust in this country, I have discovered?"

"Well, sir, I came out upon a scout to look after the safety of Ribbons, who was to drive the coach through this run."

"I heard firing and upon riding to the scene found a dead outlaw there, two horses and every evidence that the coach had been held up by road-agents."

"I then put spurs to my horse to overtake the coach and find out what had happened."

"I believe you now, sir, after getting a better look at you, for a man with such a face as you have is no villain."

"Thank you, sir," and the scout raised his hat.

"You were right in your surmise, for our coach was attacked."

"Yes, that is evident."

"We were in a stream watering the horses, when we were held up."

"There were two of us inside, fellow-passengers, and I, not caring to be robbed, opened fire.

"The result was that the coach was riddled, as you see, the driver was shot, my fellow-passenger was killed, and after all I was robbed, with only the satisfaction of killing one of the scoundrels, while I got this wound in my shoulder, as you see," and Buffalo Bill noticed that the speaker's shoulder and sleeve were stained red.

"It was a mistake to fire upon a force whose strength you did not know, sir; but let me see your wound, for it may be serious."

"Oh, no, I think not, for it has stopped bleeding, and the surgeon at the fort can soon put me to rights."

"By the way how far is the fort from here?"

"Some fifteen miles, sir."

"But I congratulate you upon your nerve," and the scout saw the dead body of Ribbons the driver in the boot, and in the coach another face upturned in death.

"One needs nerve to knock about the world, sir, and that is about my occupation, I may say profession, for I am going out to the frontier for a short run for sport, but suppose I will have to remain now some time to get an outfit and remittances from home, for though an American I live in Cuba, and the outlaws stripped me of all I had with me."

CHAPTER XXV.

OF THE SAME OPINION.

The scout did not answer the miner for full a minute.

Then he asked:

"Have you formed your opinion?"

"That is unfortunate, sir; but you will find warm and generous friends at the fort, if you have no acquaintances there."

"Not a soul, sir."

"I am friendless and penniless, a bad situation to be in is it not?" and the stranger smiled.

"Well, yes, but as I am your first acquaintance in the wild West, I will endorse you, sir, at the sutler's for all you may need."

"You are very kind, sir, just the man that I have read that you were."

"Permit me to introduce myself as Austin Marvin, a United States citizen, but for years a Cuban sugar-planter who having a fair income manage to get rid of it in knocking about the world."

The scout was pleased with his new-found friend, and after looking at his wound, placing upon it a bandage of cold water, and telling him to let the horses show the way, as they would take the right trail where there were dividing ones, he set off on his ride back to search for the road-agents, asking Mr. Marvin to request Colonel Dunwoody to send a dozen of his scouts out to join him at Deep Dell Brook with all speed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MINER'S NOTE.

"THERE'S a fellow I like."

"Frank, brave and whole-souled, with nerve enough to get him out of any scrape, unless he tackles a Wild Western road-agent."

"There he made a mistake."

So mused Buffalo Bill as he rode on his way back to the scene of the tragedy.

He did not go back at the speed he had ridden to overtake the coach, for he wished to spare his horse, and it was just three hours after his crossing Deep Dell Brook, that he returned to it.

He hoped to find the miner there.

But in this he was disappointed.

Instead, he found a stick stuck up in the trail, and in the top, which was split, was a slip of paper.

The scout felt that he had work before him, so he first watered his horse and then staked him out to feed, after taking off the saddle and bridle so that the animal could have a complete rest.

Then he sat down to read the note, which had been left by the miner and was quite lengthy.

It was as follows, written in an educated legible hand:

"I came to the scene and found the dead bodies of horse and outlaw, and wounded horse still living.

"Shot him to put him out of his misery and appropriated the saddle, bridle and blanket with which he was equipped, for as you may remember, I found good use for them.

"I then thoroughly searched the dead outlaw but found nothing, any more than that he had been shot through the heart.

"I dug him a grave on the bank of the brook and placed him in it.

"Then I began to look for something of interest in the trails.

"As well as I could make out the two horses were two of the three whose trail I had followed to where I met you.

"If this is the case then there were but three outlaws in the attack on the coach, unless others joined them here, and of that I could find no trace.

"But perhaps they may have come on foot and thus left no trail which I could find.

"I examined the cliffs on either side but found only trace of two places where men had been lying in ambush, and so I feel sure that they must have been those I followed.

"How the two horses came to be shot I do not understand, for there is a space to left of trail where three horses were staked out, and following tracks from there they all led into the deep cut at the brook.

"There is but the track of one horse leading away from the spot, and that one went into the stream.

"I went up the stream for half a mile and found the spot where the trail left the water.

"You can ride direct to an overhanging rock and there you will find it, and it bears away to the northward up the ridge.

"With this discovery I returned and will now start for my cabin, hoping to meet you returning before I turn off of the coach trail to go back the way I came."

There was no name to this whatever, either at beginning or ending.

But it was explicit and to the point.

Having read it the scout at once wrote on a slip of paper:

"Come to overhanging rock up Deep Dell Brook half a mile, and take my trail from there. B. B."

With this the scout walked to the grave of the dead outlaw, and as he gazed at it a moment said:

"Humane as well as brave is Deadshot Dean, to bury this fellow."

Then he started up the stream, following the water as the banks were impassable.

Half a mile up he came to the overhanging rock which Carroll Dean had referred to, and he had not the slightest difficulty in finding the trail.

He at once followed it on up the ridge and on for several miles when it became too dark for him to go further.

Then he went into camp for the night.

He had marked the trail for his men to follow and knew that they would be on hand at Deep Dell Brook that night, ready to start on after him at daylight.

As he would have but a few miles the start of them, and would have to find the trail as he went along, while he would mark his for them to follow, they would be able to travel more rapidly and overtake him before noon.

He was surprised that the coach had been held up with only three men, as every evidence revealed, and said to himself:

"Silk Lasso Sam was there, for no other would dare do it."

"The outlaw killed was not Silk Lasso Sam, and there is only one horse-trail here, but two men must have escaped."

"One of them went on foot and the other on horseback, and the latter must be Silk Lasso Sam, with the booty."

"I should much like to get that young man's money and valuables back for him, so I will find just where this trail ends."

"Thanks to Deadshot Dean I have a chance to go on without delay, and the boys will not be long in overtaking me."

Wrapping himself in his blanket Buffalo Bill slept as serenely as though upon a bed, and in perfect safety.

Just as the first ray of light came, however, he was up and on the trail again, to follow it to its end.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE COACH.

THE driver of the coach which had passed through such a tragic scene, after the departure of Buffalo Bill, drove on at the regular speed held on the trail, as he allowed the horses to take the pace.

His wound was not a serious one, though it pained him in using his arm while driving.

On went the team over hill, down valley and through canyon, until at last, upon ascending a ridge to the summit, the fort came into view, far in the distance.

There had been several trails branching off from the main one, but as Buffalo Bill had told him to do, the driver had allowed the horses to take their own way, and so had not gone wrong.

When the coach drew nearer to the fort, the sentinel saw that it was not the bearded driver Ribbons who was upon the box.

Nor was it Horseshoe Ned the Picturesque Driver of the Overland, as the "regular" was called, for he had been ill at the fort for the past two runs of the coach.

He reported the fact to the corporal, who in turn called to the sergeant, and he made it known to the officer of the day.

That officer happened to be Captain Dick Caruth, and he met the coach as it halted at the gate.

The volunteer driver raised his hat as the officer approached, and said pleasantly:

"Kindly tell me, sir, to whom I am to deliver the coach, for I am but a volunteer driver, a tenderfoot, as you call greenhorns out here."

"You have had trouble, sir, I see, and I shall be glad to conduct you to Colonel Dunwoody and lend you any aid within my power."

"I am Dick Caruth, sir, captain of B. Troop," said Captain Caruth pleasantly, seeing that the man on the box had the appearance of being a gentleman.

"Thank you, sir, but I'll run the coach to the stables."

Captain Caruth lightly leaped upon the box with the driver, and with an excuse, as the driver was wounded, took the reins and sent the team humming along to the stage station in the fort.

"You have indeed had trouble, I see, sir, for Ribbons has driven his last time," and he glanced at the dead form of the driver coiled up in the box.

"Yes, sir, and a fellow-passenger with me is dead inside the coach."

"And you are wounded, I am sorry to see."

"A mere scratch, sir."

"We will soon have you in the hands of Surgeon Powell, though if able to do so I would like you to first report to Colonel Dunwoody with me."

"Certainly, sir, for this wound is slight."

They had now reached the stage station, and Captain Caruth turned the coach over to the agent, and the bodies to an officer whom he called, while he said:

"There is Surgeon Powell now."

"Ho, Powell."

Doctor Frank Powell approached and Captain Caruth introduced him to the stranger, who had given his name as Austin Marvin.

"Come with us, Powell, to the colonel, as Mr. Marvin has a report to make, and an interesting

one I'll guarantee, and then see to his wound for him."

"With pleasure," answered Frank Powell, and the two officers escorted the stranger up to headquarters.

The news had spread like wildfire that the coach had come in driven by a passenger, who was wounded, and that Ribbons and a passenger had been killed in a fight with Silk Lasso Sam, so that there were many eyes turned upon the stranger as he went along with Captain Caruth and Surgeon Powell.

The colonel met the party upon the piazza, and was presented to the stranger by Captain Caruth, and he gave him a most cordial welcome, while he said:

"Now, Mr. Marvin, Surgeon Powell, being here be must first dress your wound, and then I will hear what you have to say, but not before."

So a basin and bandages were sent for, and the wound was skillfully and quickly dressed.

It was a flesh wound, the bullet having cut its way through the shoulder, but doing no damage to any great extent.

A glass of wine was then given the stranger, and Colonel Dunwoody signified his willingness to hear what Mr. Marvin had to say.

"I was a passenger, sir, on the coach, having come through from the East."

"There was one other passenger on the coach, but his name I did not learn, and he got on after leaving Bald Bluff Station."

"I was traveling with light baggage, but had considerable money, some drafts, and my watch, chain and some other things of value."

"At Deep Dell Creek the driver halted to water his horses, and we were suddenly confronted by a man who demanded a delivery of our money and valuables."

"I live in Cuba, where I have large interests as a sugar-planter, though I am an American, and there we receive such demands by opening fire upon the bandits."

"This I did, killing the man who made the demand, and I believe wounded another."

"But the result was fatal, for a volley of bullets riddled the coach, killing my fellow-passenger and the driver and wounding me."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE REPORT OF THE "HOLD UP."

"It was most unfortunate that you fired, Mr. Marvin, though I cannot censure you for so doing," said Colonel Dunwoody.

"Yes, sir, I sought to protect my own, to defend my life."

"But I saw that resistance was madness, so yielded and was robbed of all I possessed, as was also the other passenger, for they searched his body and that of the dead driver as well."

"Then I was told to mount the box and drive on, unless I wished to share the fate of my companions."

"This I did, and I was glad at least to find that they had left the drivers' rifle and revolver in a holster strapped to the box."

"I had gone some dozen miles, I suppose, when I heard hoof-falls behind, so halted, and using the coach as a breastwork stood ready to defend my life, as I supposed they had changed their minds and intended to kill me."

"But instead it was Buffalo Bill, your scout—"

"Ha! Buffalo Bill was there then?" cried the colonel, while Surgeon Powell said:

"Bravo for Buffalo Bill."

"The brave fellow is always near when wanted," Captain Caruth remarked.

The stranger then resumed:

"He had been on a scout, he told me, heard firing and rode toward the scene."

"He found two dead horses belonging to the road-agents, and the dead outlaw."

"Then he came on after the coach."

"And overtook you some twelve miles from the scene?"

"Yes, sir."

"But not knowing him, and as he did not look unlike the leader of the bandits, I at first supposed that it was he."

"But he told me who he was, looked at my wound and dressed it as well as he could, and said that he would return to the scene to pick up the trail, while he asked me to request you, Colonel Dunwoody, to kindly send him at once to Deep Dell Brook, a dozen of his men."

"I will at once give the order, sir."

"Permit me also to go with them, Colonel Dunwoody, if you please," said Surgeon Powell.

"If you wish it, yes."

"Then I will order the men to get ready at once, sir, and have my horse and traps in readiness, after which I will report to you, sir."

"First hear Mr. Marvin's story, for I will send the order to the scouts by the orderly."

This was done, and then Austin Marvin went on to say that the scout having left him to return to the scene he drove on to the fort, but could not make very good time, as he was unacquainted with the road.

"Now, Mr. Marvin, how many outlaws did you see?" asked the colonel.

"With the one I killed, sir, I saw nine."

"So many as that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were they mounted, or on foot?"

"Two were mounted, sir, and their horses were shot by me, in firing upon the men, and one of the riders."

"One of them was the chief, and the other men were dismounted but I suppose had their horses near."

"Doubtless."

"Now describe the chief, please?"

"He was a large man, erect in carriage, wore his hair long and a mustache and imperial, while he was dressed in buckskin leggings, a hunting-shirt, top-boots and sombrero."

"As I said, sir, his general appearance was like that of your scout Buffalo Bill."

"And the scout returned alone to the scene?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, Surgeon Powell, as you have heard about all that Mr. Marvin has to report, you had best go at once and go with all speed to join Cody at Deep Dell Brook."

The Surgeon Scout saluted the colonel, nodded pleasantly to Captain Caruth and said:

"Now, Mr. Marvin, make yourself at home in my quarters, please, and take what you can find there for your comfort."

"I do not know just when I shall return, but it will be in a few days at furthest."

With this the Surgeon Scout departed, and fifteen minutes after he rode out of the fort at the head of a dozen gallant scouts on the trail to Deep Dell Brook.

The colonel meanwhile questioned Mr. Marvin more closely as to all that had happened, and just what the outlaw chief had said to him.

"He told me that as I was a stranger, and did not know that it was death by the laws of the band, for any one to fire upon them, he would spare my life, although I had killed one of his men."

"Then he said that they were called Will-o'-the-Wisps and no one had ever heard of a Will-o'-the-Wisp being caught."

"I suggested that my bullet had brought one down, and he said that I had best not brag of my work, so I wisely kept silence."

"Then he sent his regards to you, Colonel Dunwoody, and said that he thought that he was deserving of larger rewards than those offered for him."

"The scoundrel!"

"I admire his impudence," the colonel said.

Captain Caruth then offered his quarters to Mr. Marvin, but the latter said:

"I thank you, but I have come to stay some little while and enjoy border life."

"I have to write to Havana, too, for remittances, so if you will permit me to secure quarters and pay for them, it will be just what I desire."

It was arranged then that he should occupy the bachelor quarters of an officer then away on a sick leave, and who had placed them at the disposal of Captain Caruth, and before he retired that night Austin Marvin found that he had fallen among friends.

CHAPTER XXX.

AT FAULT.

BUFFALO BILL started bright and early upon the trail, feeling confident that his scouts would not be far behind him.

He rode on at an easy gait, for the trail of the single horse was readily followed, and at last the country became hard and barren, to such an extent that he could no longer follow the tracks.

He tried all he could to go on from where he could see the last indentations of hoofs in the ground, but in vain.

So he decided that his only course was to wait until his men came up, and then he could divide the force into three parties.

One of these could move away to the right in a semicircle.

Another could go in a semicircle to the left, and the third hold straight on, and the three could meet at a certain point ahead.

In this way they must cross the trail at some place, most surely.

He had just decided upon this course when he heard the sound of hoofs, and the scouts came into sight.

At their head was the Surgeon Scout, Frank Powell, and that they had ridden hard their horses showed.

"Ho, Doc, I am awful glad to see you, for I have run aground," cried Cody.

"And we are glad to find you, Bill, so soon."

"It was good of you to come."

"Oh, I thought I saw a chance to be in at the capture of the fox, so I came along."

"Good!"

"We got to Deep Dell just at nightfall, and found your note, so we went into camp, but were at the rock before light, and pushed on from there on your trail."

"Now, what have you found out?"

"Nothing."

"There is no trail here."

"The ground won't allow a horse-track to show."

"That is bad."

"And it is the same thing as far as Sandy Creek, I guess, so I waited for you to come up."

"Here we are."

"Well, we'll have breakfast, and then my plan is to push a party straight ahead to Sandy Creek."

"Another can circle to the right, another to the left, and all meet at the creek, and if we do not find a trail, I shall be greatly mistaken."

"We can but try, Bill."

There was a halt of an hour for rest and dinner, and then the scouts were divided into three parties.

One went directly forward, the two others to the right and left, one under Surgeon Powell, the other commanded by Buffalo Bill.

The country was very wild, very barren, and there was not a chance for any animal to live there upon vegetation, it was so scant, and only found here and there in spots.

There was, far in the distance, a mountain range, rugged, lofty, and the base washed by the waters of Sandy Creek, a stream which from a small brook in dry weather, becomes a mighty river when the floods come.

It was full of quicksands, and only here and there was there a crossing made by buffalo, deer, and other animals, but these were not frequently traveled, as the range was as devoid of vegetation as the surrounding country.

The stream ran in a crescent around the range, which ended there abruptly, and the sides were precipitous, and not broken even by canyons.

It was upon the banks of the creek, just at nightfall, that the three parties met.

They had had a hard and fatiguing ride of it, and horses and men felt the jaunt.

Just upon the bank there were a few stunted trees, and some grass, enough for a night's feed for the horses, while water could be gotten from the creek.

"We will camp here to-night, Doc," said Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, we can do nothing else."

"It is lucky we found these trees and grass, or we would have had it rough among the rocks."

"You saw no trace of a trail, Bill?"

"Not the photograph of one, doctor."

"Nor did I."

"If the outlaws have a retreat in these lands, then I do not know where it is, and the stories of having large numbers of cattle and horses is not so."

"No indeed, for nothing could live here."

"Nor in the range yonder."

"So it seems, but we will have a look at that to-morrow, going on foot, and returning in time to get back to grass at night, for the horses will begin to suffer."

The night passed without disturbance, save the yelping of a wolf or the cry of a panther coming from the Rocky Range, as the ridge was called, across the stream.

The next morning, leaving their horses, with two scouts as a guard, the rest of the party crossed at a buffalo ford and went to the range.

No trace of a horse-track could be found, and only half the number managed to get any distance up the ridge, and then were glad enough to now return, for they saw that no horse could find footing there.

"If the creek were to rise while we were over here, Bill, and remained swollen for a few days we would starve to death."

"So we would, unless we lived on wolf meat."

"No, we'll give it up, for the Will-o'-the-Wisps have no retreat here, that is certain."

And wholly at fault the scouts set off on their return to the fort.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MINER'S RETURN.

DEADSHOT DEAN found, on his way back to his cabin at Yellow Dust Valley, that the horse he rode was by no means a bad one.

He had both speed and bottom, only he was very thin and had evidently not been well cared for as his hide was in a very rough condition.

"With care he will come out all right, and care he shall have," said the miner, and he began to look to the comfort of his horse before he did to his own at each halting-place on the way back.

Arriving at the cabin he found that some one had been there.

His lock had been tampered with, for they key caught in the padlock and he found some difficulty opening it.

But it had not been unlocked, or if so, the door had not been opened, as the miner had attached a very ingenious contrivance for keeping it closed.

He would close it, and then lock it, with padlocks and chains.

But when it closed it lowered a heavy bar down behind it, and it could not be opened from without unless the secret was known.

This secret was a string which was attached to one end of the bar, passed up over a pulley, and the end came to a knot in the wood over the door.

This knot pulled out and the string raised the bar, thus enabling the cabin door to open.

As this had not been disturbed, Deadshot

Dean knew that the door had resisted those who had tried to get in.

His first duty was to erect at the rear of the cabin a shelter for his horse, where he could keep him at night, with no fear of being stolen.

Grass there was in plenty in the valley and canyons near, where he could feed by day, and he could cut and cure a quantity that would make excellent hay to be stowed away for use up at the cabin.

He devoted his day to this work, and then at nightfall went over to Pocket City, to have his supper at The Frying Pan, as he wished to have a talk with the beautiful landlady, and see if he could fathom the mystery surrounding her connection with the outlaws, which he now felt certain was the case.

He found Bonnie Belle seated upon the piazza of The Frying Pan, as though enjoying the sunset beyond the distant range of mountains.

It was her wont to place a silver bugle to her lips just at sunset, and going to each end of the piazza, and the front to call her miner boarders to supper by sounding a few clear, ringing notes, for she was an expert player of a cornet.

She had the bugle in her lap awaiting the time when the miner approached.

"Good-evening, Bonnie Belle, I am here to-night for supper before your call!" said the miner.

"So I see, but I am glad to have you, Deadshot Dean."

"What luck in your digging to-day?"

"I have not worked very hard to-day, Bonnie Belle; but where is your old friend?"

"Powder face Pete's father, you mean?"

"Yes."

"He has gone, left that night you were here."

"He is a strange man, to gamble with the money you had raised for him, and just after hearing of his son's death."

"Yes, he is an odd one."

"But have you had any visitors of late?"

"How do you mean?"

"No midnight visitors?"

"I have not seen any, though I am sure some one has been about my cabin."

"You are right, some one has, and more than that, a number of some ones."

"Why did they not make their presence known so that I could entertain them?"

"That is just what they did not wish, as your entertainments are fatal," said Bonnie Belle with a laugh.

"I thought now that I was really hospitable."

"So much so that those guests would have remained had you seen them, until the trump of Gabriel had sounded."

"Ah! you know something of their visit?"

"I simply know that in killing Powder Face Pete you obtained the bitterest enmity of his band, for he had a regularly organized league.

"There are now just fifteen of them, and that desperate fellow Mad Matt is now the captain, and he led the gang to your cabin hoping to catch you napping.

"They are determined to do you harm, so I place you upon your guard, and what I can do to protect you I will."

"You are very kind, Bonnie Belle, and I thank you for the warning."

"But how do you know this?"

"I have means of knowing many things which I cannot reveal, Deadshot Dean."

"You are a good man, and I do not wish to see you downed by a lot of cut-throats, nor will I if I can help it."

"I only wish that you had laid by enough gold so that you could leave the mines at once."

"But I have not, so must continue to take my chances while getting it, as others do."

"Will you play to-night at Devil's Den?" suddenly asked the woman.

"I shall go there and may, or may not play; but there goes the sun."

"Yes, and that is my signal," and rising she placed the bugle to her lips and wound out note after note of ringing melody that pierced the mountains and came back into the valley in a thousand echoes.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CONVICT PARDS.

THE bugle-notes of the fair landlady of The Frying Pan was the signal for the dropping of many a pick and shovel.

She had many boarders at The Frying Pan, who simply took their meals there, while fully a score dwelt there altogether, paying good prices for their living and the pleasure of catching a glimpse of their lovely hostess.

Others who had their own cabins along the valley, were governed in their work by the "Belle's Bugle" as they called it, and went to their homes.

Then the storekeepers, and other traders in Gold Dust Valley made The Frying Pan their place of resort in leisure hours.

Bonnie Belle invited the miner to her table for supper, which was situated in an alcove of the large dining-room, but so that the hostess could command a view of the entire room.

Anxious to know more of this strange young girl, for she seemed scarcely more, the miner ac-

cepted the invitation and was envied by all who saw him.

They saw too by his actions that he had been accustomed to refined customs at the table and several said to each other in their comments, that the hostess of The Frying Pan and the miner of Hangman's Gulch, as he was called, would make a great "team."

"He are a dandy fer good looks, and she are a daisy for beauty, and both of 'em has seen better days, so it would be great ef they shu'd tie up," said one.

"But I has heered that he do be married already," another responded.

A look of disgust greeted this, with the words:

"Married?"

"Yes."

"East?"

"Yes, where he lives."

"This be ther West."

"Well?"

"What's being married East got ter do with gittin' spliced West, so long as ther man hev ther good sense not ter let ther two misses' git tergether, fer then he'll hev 'em both ter fight?"

"Thet's so, and it will be a settler fer him, as I knows."

"You knows?"

"Yes."

"Been married?"

"Twice."

"At same time?"

"Waal, I didn't wait fer one ter die, yer see, afore I spliced ag'in."

"Waal?"

"Thet's why I'm here."

"I see."

"Yes."

"How was it?"

"They was both of 'em lovin' critters, and sot so much store by me I thought I c'u'd git 'em ter turn Mormon."

"But I picked out ther two wrong gals fer that kind o' agreement, and when they had done trampin' on me I were sent ter prison fer a period o' years."

"Sarve yer time out?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Waal, ther were a feller in ther cell next ter me, and he were a dandy fer plannin'."

"He were in fer murder, and it were a life sentence."

"So he writ me a note sayin' he c'u'd git out ef I'd help him, and then we c'u'd skoot tergether."

"I were agreeable, and so one night he signaled all were O. K., so I jist opened my door, the lock being picked with a wire key he gave me, and I c'u'd git my hand through, where his door were solidid."

"I unlocked his door, ther keeper were asleep at ther end o' ther corridor, and he jist tapped him on ther head, took his weapons and his clothing, I taking his overcoat and he ther under one."

"Then we got into ther office, where ther t'other keeper were snoozin' afore ther fire."

"We knocked him over, too, and a big dog bounced us, which bit my pard bad, but we cut his throat."

"Then we snatched some more clothing, and with ther keys let ourselves out into the streets."

"But ther prison folkses had been roused by ther dog, and they was arter us, so we divided and ran different ways, and I has never seen him since."

"Waal, I has!"

"You has!"

"Yes."

"Would yer know him ef yer hed seen him?"

"No, fer I only seen him that night in stripes, with cropped hair and smooth-shaved face."

"Put it thar, pard, fer I is ther man."

"You?"

"Yas, for here's ther dog's bite on my hand, and it were in G—— Prison it happened, just four years ago this blessed night."

The two convicts warmly grasped hands.

They were seated upon the piazza of The Frying Pan, and had seen each other often in the mines but neither had recognized the other in their bearded faces and long hair.

"Pard, now we must hang together, now Providence has fetched it about that we has met again."

"Sart'in."

"I has a leetle claim I digs in now and then out ther bain't money enough in it, and I has other things that pays me better then digging dirt."

"Me too."

"I has a cabin all to myself, so come and bunk with me."

"Sure, and thankee."

"Has yer any love fer that miner as was eatin' with ther Bonnie Belle ter-night?"

"I hates him," was the savage reply.

"Me too."

"He kilt my best friend, Powder Face Pete."

"Waal, he's good and I'm bad, he's got money, and I hain't, he kin go back to his home and I can't."

"That's why I hates him."

"Waal, I'm with yer, and my name is Beaver Bill."

"And I answers to ther hail o' Deadly Eye Dick."

"Oh, I knows yer."

"Then we is pards, and thar is money in that miner o' Hangman's Gulch fer both of us."

"Pards we is."

"Until death us do part."

Thus a compact for crime was made.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TWO COMPACTS FOR GOOD.

THE miner really enjoyed his supper with Bonnie Belle.

He found her a woman of rare culture and much information.

Talking to her he forgot his surroundings and that he was in the midst of a wild country and wilder people.

After supper, as he arose to take his leave she asked him to remain longer, and at his request sung for him, accompanying herself upon the guitar.

At last he felt that he must go, and he could not but admit to himself that he knew no more about her than he had before his coming.

"She is an unsolvable puzzle to me," he muttered again and again.

"Do you go to Devil's Den to-night?" she asked, suddenly.

"Yes, I have thought of it."

"Why have you taken to gambling?"

"A new idle fancy."

"You must give it up!"

"Why?"

"Because it will but ruin you in the end."

"Do you say that and yet gamble yourself, yes, are the mistress of the gambling saloon?"

"The more reason that I should know."

"Yet you win largely."

"I have, as the banker, a commission on all games, which pays me a handsome income."

"If I gambled alone I might be the loser largely."

"Well, I shall never play as a profession, and though it would look mean to stop if I lost, and continued playing while winning, I believe I should do so."

"You would be wise."

"Yes, though mean to back out when hurt; but somehow I am a believer in destiny, in luck call it, and I am testing my luck now."

"When fully tested, quit."

"I will, the very moment that I have put it to the test."

"May I note the time?"

"Do you mean that you wish to set the time?"

"Yes, winning or losing?"

"You may."

"And after that date I have your pledge to play no more?"

"Do you ask it?"

"I do."

"I will give it then."

"On honor?"

"Yes, on honor."

"You are one to never break your word, I believe."

"Neither to man or woman is in my power to keep it."

"Well, give me your hand."

He held his forth and she grasped it.

"You give me your word of honor that after ninety days from date you will not play another card, or game, to gamble on?"

"I do."

"You swear it?"

"I do."

"Enough, now write it down."

She placed before him pen, ink and paper, and he wrote as she dictated.

"Now, will you play to-night?" she asked.

"I think I will, but I'll make a compact with you."

"Well?"

"If I play any game at your bank or tables I will be allowed to refund the money to you when next I see you."

"Why do you wish to do this?"

"I have a purpose."

"Will you tell it to me?"

"Some day, yes."

"I will agree to it, but no one must know it besides ourselves."

"No one shall."

"Then you will gamble with others also?"

"Yes, I have a desire to play my luck against Thorny the gambler, Mad Matt and one or two others."

"You are taking big chances."

"No risk no gain you know."

"True."

"Now, I have another favor to ask of you?"

"Yes, and it is granted before asked."

"You have confidence in me, surely."

"The only one in these mines that I have confidence in," was the low and earnest reply of the woman.

"You are kind to say so."

"It is the truth."

"But now to the favor you would ask?"

"It is that you take certain money I shall bring to you and dispose of it as though your own, that is by doing good with it."

"Ah!"

"I know that you do many generous deeds among the miners, helping them in distress and in many ways, but the train is too heavy on you, and I have a certain amount of money which I wish you to take and use."

"In just what way?"

"Well, there is that poor fellow Barney, whom you had come to the hotel and live."

"He has consumption, and his days are numbered, and he expressed a wish to go home to die."

"A couple of hundred dollars will take him to his old home and leave him enough over for little luxuries, so give it to him."

"There is Sykes whose leg was broken four months ago, so pay his doctor's bill, for now he is able to go to work."

"Jew Jacobs was robbed of all he had in the world, so give him a hundred dollars and a ticket to St. Louis and back, so he can start again in business, for he never slighted one whom he knew needed aid when he had the money to give."

"Then there is that boy who ran away from home and came to the mines, but is anxious to return."

"Send him back again, and in other deserving cases dispose of the money I shall place in your hands."

"Deadshot Dean, you are a true man, and I do hope you will soon strike it rich, and be able to leave this place."

"Yes, I will do with the money as you ask, though you are giving more than you can afford, I fear."

"Oh, don't mention it, for the money is not mine, or only mine rather to devote to charity," was the response of Deadshot Dean, as he grasped the hand of the woman and took his departure.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MINER'S LUCK.

WHEN Deadshot Dean left The Frying Pan, as was his wont when coming to the camps, he made the rounds of the cabins when there were any of the miners sick, to see if he could be of any service to them.

He gave those who really needed it a few dollars to help them along, talked pleasantly with others, and invariably left a ray of sunshine with the invalids whom he visited.

Then he went to the store where he traded, and which was known as "Mike's Museum," and bought a bag of provisions to carry home with him for his week's supply.

He was one of Mike's best customers, and was always welcome in the "Museum."

Then he walked leisurely up to The Frying Pan, put away his bag until he should call for it, and then turned his steps toward Devil's Den.

The place was in full blast when he arrived, for a larger number than usual were present.

The tables were all full, and around the faro bank and other games there were crowds.

The bartenders, too, were busy passing out "whisky straight," or making "toddies," and the whole place was dense with smoke.

Deadshot Dean made his tour of the room, nodding pleasantly here and there when he saw an acquaintance, and seeming to take in all that was going on, and of course every one who was there, though with apparently no other motive than idle curiosity.

At last he

less commission for dice box ten dollars and fifty cents.

"Number one throw."

Number one took the box, blew in it for luck, rattled the dice and threw.

There were five dice in the box and of course thirty was the highest that could be thrown.

"Twenty-nine," called out the keeper.

The thrower looked pleased, for he led off with next to the highest number.

"Number Two!"

At the call of the keeper Number Two took the box.

He crossed himself, muttered something like a prayer and threw only six.

"Six, for Number Two," called out the keeper and Number Three took the box and threw, his also being a small number.

Nearly all had some peculiar manner of handling the box, saying something or seeking to get "luck."

But no one reached the twenty-nine of the first thrower until Number Twenty was called.

Then came a "tie" for he also threw twenty-nine.

"Twenty ties Number One on a twenty-nine throw."

"Twenty-one next," cried the keeper.

"Twenty-one" was Deadshot Dean.

He took the box indifferently, did not even shake the box, and threw.

"Thirty!"

"Twenty-one wins," cried the keeper, while the miner who had been following Deadshot Dean about gave a whoop that sounded through the place.

The miner took his winnings with a smile and turned from the table.

"You have won six hundred dollars in no time," said the man who still "clung closer than a brother."

"Yes, less sixty dollars commission to the tables," was the reply.

"What's yer play now?"

"I'll try a hand at cards with some one who would like to play me a game."

"I'll tell yer ther man."

"Who?"

"Thorny."

"All right."

"If you wins from him you has a streak o' gilt-edged luck bound in calf-skin."

"Where is Thorny?"

"Thar he sits, havin' cleaned out all who tackled him, and layin' for another durned fool."

"I'm the fool," was the quiet reply.

Then, with the persistent follower close at his heels the miner of Hangman's Gulch walked over to where Thorny the card-sharp sat at a table by himself, counting over his winnings to bank, for he placed his money each night in the strong box of the Devil's Den.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SUPERSTITION.

THE man Thorny was one whom few cared to test a game with.

He said that his name was Thorn, and it was soon turned into Thorny by those who had been pricked by playing a game with him.

Greenhorns and drunken men were generally his game, though now and then a miner with a run of luck would go up and give him a try, and almost invariably he downed.

Thorny had his own table, paying rent for it, and he was the only man who did.

It was in a corner, and Thorny's seat was toward the two walls, so that no one could get behind him.

His table was a block from a tree three feet in diameter, as many in height, and with boards on the top, making it square.

There were those who said that Thorny used the tree for a breastwork, and had a trap in the wall at his back, which he could slip out of if it got too hot for him inside the saloon.

The latter however had never been verified by ocular demonstration, though he had been known to dodge down behind his table and hold several men at bay.

As proof of this there were scores of bullets buried in the block, and in the plank wall behind him, to say nothing of several graves up in the burying-ground known as Sunset Hill, whose occupants had died by the hand of the card sharp.

The set-back which Thorny had had, at the hands of old Swain, the father of Powder Face Pete, had at once caused a score of miners to try their luck with him again, hoping to get their money back and their revenge at the same time.

His loss to the old man had impressed him too for awhile, and the first night he had lost every game.

But he had the nerve to stand the strain, and at last began to win again.

Then luck turned his way once more, and he got back all his losses of the past few days, and won money in the bargain.

This at last frightened off all the players, and he was seated at his table, lying in ambush for some greenhorn to come along and play with

him, when the miner pointed him out to Deadshot Dean.

"Thar he sits, innocent-like, just a layin' fer suckers," whispered the man, who was known in the mines as Dodger Jim, from the fact that he dodged every game as soon as he became a loser.

"I say, Thorny, here's a man ter tackle yer," said Dodger Jim, by way of introduction.

And he added:

"Ef yer gits away with him yer is lightning."

Thorny looked up indifferently, though he was never indifferent.

His face was a bad one, his eyes being wicked, his mouth cruel.

He was a man who dressed well, did no work other than to gamble, take care of his three horses and his room at The Frying Pan, for he boarded there and never allowed any one to enter his quarters.

As he had cut the ears off a Chinee servant for trying to see what was in the room so sacred, not for love or money could any of them afterward be gotten near his door, and in going by to other rooms they shot by like an arrow.

Landlord Lazarus was in charge there, but the gambler was too good a customer of The Frying Pan for him to quarrel with him for merely clipping off the ears of a heathen Chinee.

But had Bonnie Belle been in charge it would have been different, as she had been heard to say that she would have covered Thorny with her revolver and had the earless Chinee give him a severe thrashing.

Whether this remark had been repeated to the gambler or not, he was certainly most respectful to Bonnie Belle, treating her with a manner almost akin to awe of her.

"Oh, you wish to play do you, Deadshot Dean?" said the gambler.

"Yes."

"With me?"

"Why not with you?"

"I am a dangerous man for a greenhorn to play with."

"So I have heard, but every man may meet his Waterloo as did Napoleon."

"Very true, but I did not know that you played cards?"

"Oh, yes, though I do not often gamble."

"Well, sit down and say what you will play for?"

"I have had a run of luck to-night and I would like to stake just the sum I have won on a game, playing one game, win or lose."

"All right."

"It was six hundred less the table's fees—say, five hundred and forty dollars."

"That will suit me."

"Best two in three games."

"No, one game, I said."

"All right, cut for deal," and the gambler placed a pack of cards before the miner.

"I will not play with those cards."

"Why not?"

"I am superstitious."

"Do you mean superstitious or suspicious?"

"Well, both."

"Do you believe that I would cheat you?"

"Do not ask me for my opinion, Thorny, for I am a candid man; but I do know that when you played old Swain and did not use your pack of cards, you lost."

"Hence I am superstitious, let us say, about using a man's own weapons against him."

The eyes of the gambler flashed, and a cruel smile came over his mouth, but he was perfectly cool as he said:

"Play with what cards you please, so that it is not a pack of your cards, for I have the same superstition that you have."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GRAVE.

ONE of the bartenders was called by Thorny to bring him a pack of cards, a fresh pack never opened, the gambler added:

"For a game with a gentleman who does not wish to soil his fingers with an old pack."

"I'll do it," said the man, and he hastened away.

But Deadshot Dean called out:

"Hold on, my man!"

"Waal, pard?"

"There comes Bonnie Belle and she can give us a pack."

"I kin git 'em."

"No, I wish to test my luck, and given a pack from Bonnie Belle's fair bands will aid me I am sure."

Thorny sent a baleful glance at the miner.

He saw that he had caught a look which passed between the bartender and himself, and he saw that he did not have such a greenhorn as he had supposed to deal with.

"Yes, get us the pack," said the miner, and he hastened away.

Upon the entrance of Bonnie Belle a hush had fallen upon the crowd.

The games continued, but all loud talking ceased, and a hum only was heard.

She glided from table to table, and suddenly catching the eye of the miner, came toward

him, just as the bartender handed the cards to him.

"Here, keep the change, Flip," said the miner, handing him a five-dollar bill.

"I ordered the cards," said Thorny.

"Well, I'll pay for them," and as Bonnie Belle just then came up he continued:

"Bonnie Belle, I am going to try my luck with the great gambler Thorny, and to give me a good send-off, may I ask if you will let me have a pack of your cards, a full deck?"

"Certainly, Deadshot Dean, here—no, no, I will make no charge for them," and she took from a little reticule hanging at her belt an unopened pack of cards.

The miner took them, but his eyes were upon the face of Thorny, and he saw, in spite of the gambler's nerve, that he was considerably amazed at what he had done.

"Say, Deadshot, you have one pack, I ordered the other, so let it be a toss-up for which we use?" said Thorny.

"Very well, for that is a test of luck," was the cool reply, and the gambler said in response:

"Here, Bonnie Belle, take these two packs of cards, change them in your hands, and let us say which we will take."

Bonnie Belle saw that there was some deep game being played between the two men, but she could not fathom it.

Dodger Jim was too much interested to utter a word, and Flip, the bartender, stood behind Bonnie Belle, seemingly too much taken up with what was going on to return to his work.

"I'll take the right hand, Bonnie Belle," said the gambler.

"Hold!" came the stern command of the miner, followed by the words:

"Flip, if I see you make a signal like that again, I'll mark you for life."

The gambler uttered an oath, while Bonnie Belle turned quickly only to catch a glimpse of the form of Flip disappearing in the crowd.

From the look in her eyes, Flip had acted with great wisdom.

"I shall test this again, for that was unfair," she said coolly.

"I choose the left hand," said the gambler, and his voice was sullen now.

"And the right holds this pack," said the woman, handing over to the miner the pack she had given him.

"Thank you, Bonnie Belle," said the miner, while the gambler muttered an oath.

Slipping the pack he had bought from Flip into his pocket, Deadshot Dean placed the money he had won that night upon the table, opened the cards and said:

"Cut for deal, Thorny."

This was done, and the miner dealt.

Thorny's face began to grow black now, as he counted out five hundred and forty dollars and placed it upon the pile of money the miner had put there.

Bonnie Belle had lingered at the table, for she seemed to be drawn there now by a fascination she could not resist.

Dodger Jim was there, with his whole form in a tremor, and others had gathered about to see Deadshot Dean the miner risk a game of cards with the famous Thorny.

The gambler was nettled at the situation he found himself in, for he was forced to play with cards not of his selection, and had lost his choice and then his deal, so that he dreaded for the result of the game.

That the old man Swain had forced him to play with a new pack of cards, had simply caused a laugh at his expense; but here was a man who was forcing him to do as he wished, and having pretty much his own way with him, the gambler sharp, whom all feared.

But he was in for it, and calmly looking on was Bonnie Belle, seeming to take the deepest interest in the game.

The two men settled down to work with an air of determination to win, and each played slowly until the last card was thrown down by the gambler with an oath which told how deep was his chagrin at losing.

"It hurts you to lose, Thorny, to take a little of the poison you so often give to others with a relish," said Bonnie Belle, with a smile.

"I will play you for a thousand," was the angry reply of the gambler, turning upon the woman with flashing eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

THE challenge of the gambler to Bonnie Belle, his sudden turning upon her with angry glance, and voice that showed the suppressed feeling he in vain tried to conceal, was met with a quiet look from the woman and the words:

"I will play you for any sum you may name, Gambler Thorny."

"Will you play me for any stake?" was the earnest, quick reply.

"Do you mean for money?"

"I said nothing about what the stake should be."

"What is your demand?"

"That you play me for any stake I may name."

"Against what?"

"You shall name the sum, and if within my fortune I will pay it if I lose."

"Well, name your stake."

"That you become my wife within one week from to-night, when I will have the chaplain of the fort here to unite us."

Bonnie Belle laughed, while there followed a hush after the words of the gambler, for many heard them.

"Do you really mean it, Gambler Thony?", asked the woman, with an incredulous look.

"Yes, I do."

"Suppose that I am already married?"

"Then in that case give me the name and address of your husband and I'll pledge myself to make you a widow within a stated time."

"Well, you will not have to do that, for I have the right to pay my wager if I lose," said the woman.

A sigh of relief went up from many at this, for most of the miners had an idea that Bonnie Belle was married.

"All right, you will pay if you lose?"

"I will."

"Within one week?"

"Yes."

"Now let us play then," and the gambler took a pack of cards from his pocket, and it did not seem to strike Bonnie Belle that she should play with others.

Deadshot Dean arose from the table, yielding his seat to her, and, as he did so said loud enough for Gambler Thony to hear:

"Play with your own cards, Bonnie Belle."

"Ah, yes, thank you, Deadshot," and the woman smiled sweetly upon the miner.

"See here, Deadshot, you are not in this game, so beware how you interfere," hotly said the gambler.

"Threats do not alarm me, Gambler Thony," was the cool reply, while Bonnie Belle asked:

"Deadshot Dean, will you be my referee in this game?"

"Certainly if you wish it, Bonnie Belle."

"I do."

The gambler cast his eyes over the assembled miners, for now all was excitement in the saloon and all were pressing about the table to witness the novel game of cards.

At last his gaze fell upon Beaver Bill and he said:

"And will you be my referee, Beaver Bill?"

"Yer bet I will and see all done squar'," was the ready answer.

"Then we are to select a third," the miner remarked.

"Yes," said the gambler while Bonnie Belle bowed.

"I will name Storekeeper Mike," said Deadshot Dean.

"Neither the gambler or Beaver Bill dared raise any objection to Mike the storekeeper, for he was universally respected as an honest man.

"I'll be with yez," said Mike and he stepped forward and joined Deadshot Dean and Beaver Bill.

"Now, I am ready," remarked the gambler in his pompous manner.

"I am not," coolly responded the woman.

"What is to be done now?" petulantly asked the gambler.

"Why, I have put up my stake, so where is yours?" asked Bonnie Belle.

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten you were to name it?"

"You are a rich man I believe, Thony?"

"I am not a poor man."

"I have heard you say that you were worth all of fifty thousand dollars."

"Perhaps I am."

"Will you say that you are?"

"I will not say that I am not."

"It is just as well."

"Now write as I dictate."

The gambler turned and took from a shelf behind him a piece of paper, a pen and ink.

All gambling in the saloon had ceased now, and the crowd were perfectly silent, listening and watchful.

"Write as I tell you."

"I am ready."

"I Thony, the Gambler of Pocket City, do hereby pledge myself to transfer to Bonnie Belle all my rights and titles to my claims, horses, equipments, jewelry and all other personal property, along with every dollar of money I possess."

"Now sign it."

This was done.

"Now you sign as witnesses, Mike and Deadshot Dean."

This was done.

"Now, Gambler Thony, do you stake your fortune against my hand in marriage?"

"I do," was the firm response, and a wild yell of admiration broke from hundreds of lips at the gambler's pluck.

Bonnie Belle's face slightly paled, but she showed no other emotion and her voice was unmoved as she said:

"I am worth more in your eyes than I deemed possible."

"But now let us play, for it is your fortune or my hand," and Bonnie Belle took up the cards in which there was not the slightest tremor.

Then, amid a breathless silence, which was broken only by the suppressed breathing of the men, the woman began the game.

Each one played as though fully realizing what defeat meant to them, and when at last the game ended, Thony the gambler turned livid as Bonnie Belle said:

"The game is mine, Gambler Thony."

"And you have won his fortune too," said Deadshot Dean.

"Yes, I am a ruined man," groaned the gambler.

"Had you won I would have been held to my wager, Gambler Thony, but I release you from your pledge—see!"

With this she tore up the paper he had signed and tossed the pieces into the air.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TWO PARDS.

The receiving back of the fortune he had just lost was a great joy to Gambler Thony, for he had not the remotest idea that the woman would not claim all from him.

He had fallen in love with her, and had risked all to win her.

That he had lost her was as bad a blow in one sense to him as if he had lost his fortune.

"I will win her yet," was his low-uttered determination which perhaps only the ears of the miner Dean and Bonnie Belle caught.

The crowd seemed delighted that matters had turned out as they had, and the woman rose in their estimation for her pluck in not backing down from the challenge of the gambler.

During the conversation which followed Carroll Dean slipped out of the saloon.

He turned quickly as he walked toward The Frying Pan and saw two men pass out of the Devil's Den.

"As I expected," he muttered.

He however watched them without appearing to do so, and saw that they took the trail for his home.

He determined to leave his bag of provisions at the hotel and dog the steps of the two men.

This he did until he saw them approach the entrance to the Hangman's Gulch and then halt, disappearing in the shadows of the rocks.

"They are lying in ambush for me."

"Well, I'll see if they will face me when I come," muttered the miner.

Acquainted thoroughly with the ridges and canyons, he turned off the trail and at a rapid step, after gaining the ridge, made his way to his cabin.

The two men who had left the Devil's Den just after Deadshot Dean, were the two convict pards, Deadly Eye Dick and Beaver Bill.

"We'll git thar ter-night, pard," said Beaver Bill.

"Yer seen him with ther money then?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Wal, he tuk in about six hundred from ther tables and as much more he wins from Thony."

"Good! I'd kill a man any time fer that money."

"I'd kill him fer less."

"Thet hain't all we gets."

"What more?"

"We'll git his keys, go to his cabin, and find what he hev got hid away."

"It's a go."

"They says he has a heap laid up."

"Shouldn't wonder, for he's so quiet."

"Yas, and quiet folks is devilish sly."

"They is for sure."

"We kin git away afore he's missed, fer nobody ever goes ter his cabin."

"Thet's so."

"We will steal a couple o' good critters and light out, and it's better ter go to another place and hev money then ter stay here almost broke."

"Sure."

The two plotters were walking along the trail now, for they had seen the miner go to the hotel after his bag, which they knew he had left there.

They had been dogging his steps ever since he had come into the camps.

"I don't half like this place, Pard Beaver, fer a stopping-place even in daylight."

"Nor does I, Deadly Eye Dick, but it's only fer a short while."

"And ther deeds suits the place."

"Exactly."

"Shall we shoot him?"

"No, I has my lariat, and it's better ter catch him, then knife him."

"It don't make no fuss."

"No."

"What shall we do with the body?"

"Take it to his cabin and leave it thar."

"Try and make believe he were murdered thar?"

"Yas."

"Waal, I don't care how it's done, so we kills him and gits ther cash."

"Nor me."

They had now reached the entrance to Hangman's Gulch.

Crossing to the other side, where there was a thicket and some boulders, they took up position where they could hold every advantage.

The moon was shining brightly, and they could see up the trail for some distance.

They could also see up the Hangman's Gulch to the bend, and they kept their eyes often turned in that direction.

They were prepared for their work of death, for one had his lasso ready to throw, the other his revolver in hand to fire if they would have to do so.

"He's a long time a-comin', pard."

"Waal he is."

"But I s'pose he's stopped at The Frying Pan fer a talk with some one."

"Maybe."

"And that bag were a heavy one, say some sixty pounds, maybe more."

"That's so."

"We is impatient, that's all."

"Yas, that's it."

They thus talked on in the lowest tones, their eyes now constantly riveted upon the trail where they expected the miner to appear.

"I wish he'd come, for this place is ha'nted, and it seems as if I c'u'd see sperits flittin' about in ther gulch."

"Don't talk thet way, pard, for I is afeer' o' ghosts."

"Has yer ever seen one?"

This leading question was answered by a yell of terror followed by the words:

"I sees one now!"

"Oh, Lordy hev marcy!"

With this prayer Beaver Bill leaped over the rock in front of him and sped toward Pocket City, while Deadly Eye Dick was close upon his heels, looking over his shoulder as he ran and beholding a white robed form gliding down Hangman's Gulch as though in hot pursuit of the intended assassins of the miner.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HORSESHOE NED.

AUSTIN MARVIN found the lieutenant's quarters, to which he was conducted by Captain Caruth, to be most pleasant.

There was a sitting-room, bedroom and kitchen and dining-room.

He was able to get an excellent servant, and Captain Caruth ordered provisions sent him from the sutler, charged to his account, until the visitor could hear from his home.

The lieutenant had left his guns and horses at the fort, so that Mr. Marvin had the use of three, and the whole-souled captain placed his wardrobe at the disposal of his new acquaintance.

Thus did the stranger in a strange land find himself most bountifully cared for.

Officers called upon him, and he was made to feel at home by being invited to the Club, and to dine at the colonel's home upon the day after his arrival.

It was the third day after his coming that the stage was to start out again on its eastward run, for it made a weekly trip.

The body of the driver Ribbons had been decently buried, as had also the remains of the passenger who had been killed.

Horseshoe Ned had gotten able to take the coach out, so he mounted the box when the time came to start.

"We would send an escort on this run, Ned, but there will be no need of it with Buffalo Bill and his men upon the trail, for you will certainly run across them somewhere on the trip," said Captain Caruth, who with Austin Marvin had gone to see the coach start.

"I wish you success, my man, and if you can find any clew to my luggage and valu-

ables, I will pay you handsomely," said Mr. Marvin.

"See here, pard, I hain't one ter take pay fer doin' my duty, and though your money's doubtless as good as anybody's, I hain't the man to touch it."

"No offense intended, my friend; but I am anxious to get my things, and if you will state that a reward will be paid for them, delivered to you, I'll be glad to pay it."

"I'll do it, sir, and maybe ther reward may tempt ther road-agents more than ther worth o' what they has."

"I hope so, sincerely."

"Well, a safe run to you," and the coach went off with a cheer from the large crowd which had assembled to see it start, all admiring the pluck of Horseshoe Ned, who was one of the crack drivers on the Overland, and one of the honest as well.

A whole-souled fellow, reared among horses, a mail-rider as a boy in the mountains of Kentucky, and afterward the driver of a stage through the wildest region of that State for years, he was no new hand when he came West and took the reins over a team on the Overland.

A handsome man, with full beard, long hair, and a slender, wiry form, he was admired by all whom he came in contact with, while, as an evidence of his fearlessness and utter defiance of the road-agents, his broad-brimmed slouch hat was pinned up in front with a diamond horseshoe.

In addition, he wore a pin in his black scarf, a horseshoe of rubies, and his sleeve-buttons were of the same design, as was the buckle of his revolver belt, but in solid gold.

The whip he carried had a handle mounted with gold, and the head of a horse at the butt.

The shirts which Horseshoe Ned wore, and he always dressed neatly, had in them designs of horseshoes, whips, and the heads of horses.

"I go empty this run."

"How leetle it takes ter skeer people off from a ride, and yet ther safest time ter go is just after being held up."

"I guesses ther stranger won't see his duds, but I'll spread ther news along that we'll pay fer 'em."

"He were lucky only ter lose his traps, for t'other passengers and poor Ribbons lost their lives."

"Well, this trail is gittin' more dangerous every day, instead of better, and unless Buffalo Bill and his scouts can catch some of the Will-o'-the-Wisps and hang 'em, it will soon be too bad fer travel."

"Ribbons sh'd hev told that tenderfoot not to be a fool and open fire upon them outlaws, or he'd get it back with interest."

"But ther gent hain't such a tenderfoot arter all, for he kilt one of the outlaws and wounded another, after which he had the nerve ter drive ther coach ter ther fort, and come in about on time, and thet, too, over a mighty bad road, and with ther dead eyes of Ribbons a-staring at him all the time, and another deader in ther coach a-hurryin' him up ter git buried."

"No, thet stranger are one ter tie to every time, and they does say he drove in as cool as picnic lemonade, and stated there had been trouble on ther way, same as if he'd only broke his harness or lamed one of the critters."

"Yas, I'd like ter git his traps fer him, though he did cause the Will-o'-the-Wisps to make a sieve of my coach."

So mused Horseshoe Ned as he drove on his lonely way over the dangerous trail dotted all along by scenes where tragedies had occurred.

CHAPTER XL.

AT DEEP DELL CREEK.

As Horseshoe Ned drew near Deep Dell Creek he began to look about him with more caution

He could recall over a dozen murders committed there by the Will-o'-the-Wisps, two of which were the drivers of the coaches.

Several of the coach teams had been shot down there, and where no other harm than robbery had been committed, scores of times had the outlaws held up the stages at or near that point.

The scene was a perfect one for a dastard deed and the escape of the perpetrators.

The stream was a hundred feet wide, shallow, running over a pebbly bed, and upon either side the banks arose into cliffs clad with foliage and vines.

A natural cut led through these cliffs, and a steep hill went down to the stream upon either side.

To those who were there for crime, they could lie upon the edge of the cliffs, commanding the coach wholly with no danger to themselves.

The coach could not turn to retrace its way, once in the stream, or on the hill leading to it, and up the steep ascent it could not go at a rapid pace.

A man in the trail therefore protected by others upon the cliffs, had everything his own way.

Suddenly, as the coach neared the stream, going down the hill to it, came a loud command:

"Halt that coach!"

"Hands up, Horseshoe Ned!"

"Yer infernal idiot, don't yer see I can't halt until I gits inter ther stream?" yelled the driver, managing his horses with consummate skill.

"But you must halt, Horseshoe, for we wish to talk with you."

"Buf'ler Bill, it's you is it?"

"Well, I'll fergive yer ef yer did skeer me almost ter death, durn yer."

"I is mighty glad yer hain't Will-o'-the-Wisps."

Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell now rode into view, laughing at the reply of Horseshoe Ned to their demand to halt.

"Well, Ned, what is the news at the fort?" asked Surgeon Powell.

"We give Ribbons a big send-off at ther funeral, sir, and ther Gospil Sharp of ther fort throw'd in extra prayers and talk on til they'll admit him up yonder without a word, ef poor Ribbons, knowin' his wickedness, didn't start in t'other direction arter he got ter be a sperit."

"He was a little wild, Ned, but Ribbons died doing his duty and the Lord can't ask any more of any man," responded Surgeon Powell.

"Thet's so, sir; but has yer seen any o' ther Will-o'-the-Wisps?"

"No, and we have followed the single trail leading from here to the barren lands, and we could do no more."

"Yer say ther single trail, sir?"

"Yes."

"The gent as fetched ther coach in says there was more of 'em by many."

"Yes, but they were on foot, for only one horse went away from here, and two were killed."

"Their bodies Bill had the scouts drag into the stream to get them out of your way."

"I'm glad of that, sir; for my leaders is as skeered o' dead horses as niggers be of ghosts."

"The stranger is at the fort then all right?"

"Yes, sir, happy as a clam at high tide."

"He seems like a very clever fellow."

"He does, sir, and I'm thinkin' he'll shine with ther ladies and make some young officers' hearts bleed tears o' regret."

Surgeon Powell laughed at Horseshoe Ned's way of speaking of Austin Marvin's becoming a rival to the officers at the fort, and then turned to Buffalo Bill who had been taking in the situation with the coach about in position where it had been when fired upon.

"What is it, Bill?" asked the Surgeon Scout.

"I wish Horseshoe Ned would drive up the hill, turn and come back again, halting right there."

"I'll do it, Bill, fer when you takes a scent you knows how ter run it down," was the driver's reply.

Then he drove on across the stream, and to the utter amazement doubtless of his horses turned about and started back toward the fort.

Halting in the stream again, he watched Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell moving slowly about.

When the coach had started off the Surgeon Scout had asked:

"What is your clew, Cody?"

"I wish to see where those shots came from that crashed into the coach."

"Ah! a good idea if you are suspicious that the whole truth has not been told?"

"Well, doctor, let us get the situation as it was here, where the shots came from, where the dead and wounded horse lay, and the dead outlaw was when I found him."

"Then we can see where the horse, whose track we followed came from, and what trail we can find of men on foot."

"With these facts down fine we can perhaps get a clew which may lead to what we would like to know."

For half an hour the two scouts looked over the situation, Surgeon Powell sketching the scene and position of the coach and all.

Then Horseshoe Ned was told to go on his way, and driving up to the hill he turned and soon came back on his run eastward.

"You have a suspicion, Bill?"

"Yes, Doc, and you are the man to find out for me whether I am right or wrong."

"Now let us go and join the scouts and then return to the fort."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE SCOUTS RETURN.

SURGEON POWELL, with Buffalo Bill and his scouts, returned to Pioneer Post forced to acknowledge themselves cleverly outwitted by the outlaws.

The officer and chief of scouts went at once with Captain Caruth to report to Colonel Dunwoody.

"Well, Surgeon Powell, what luck?"

"None, I may say, sir."

"Do you acknowledge yourself beaten, Cody?" asked Colonel Dunwoody with some anxiety of tone, for he had expected certainly that the scouts would make some discovery.

"We do for the present, sir."

"For the present?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you have a clew, Cody?"

"We have hopes, sir."

"Ah!"

"Colonel Dunwoody, would you have the kindness to send for Mr. Marvin and allow Cody to question him closely, sir, so that we can get at a better understanding of just what happened at Deep Dell Brook?" asked the Surgeon Scout.

"Certainly, doctor," and the colonel sent his orderly to Mr. Austin Marvin with his compliments and asked his presence at head quarters.

The stranger came at once and greeted Buffalo Bill pleasantly while he said:

"You were my first friend in the Wild West, Mr. Cody."

"Doctor Powell, I am glad to meet you again, and I trust you have some good report of the capture of that outlaw chief and his band?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Marvin, we failed to find him or his men, and Cody wishes to ask you a few questions that may aid him in his search, for he has not given it up by any means," answered Surgeon Powell.

"No indeed, for once on the war-path, Mr. Marvin, Buffalo Bill clings to it like grim death and will never give up until he reaches the end of the trail," said Colonel Dunwoody.

"I shall be happy to answer Mr. Cody any questions within my power," and Austin Marvin turned toward the scout.

Taking a piece of paper and pencil Buffalo Bill placed them upon the table before him.

Surgeon Powell then took from his pocket the slip of paper upon which he had sketched the situation at Deep Dell Brook, but he stood in the background, pencil in hand, while Mr. Marvin faced Buffalo Bill.

"This is the hill, Mr. Marvin, descending to the brook, this the stream, and here the hill ascending, the coach going west, in this direction," said Buffalo Bill, marking the points designated upon the paper.

"Yes, sir."

"Now, where was the coach when halted?"

"In the stream, the horses drinking."

"And where was the firing done?"

"I fired from the window of the coach the moment I saw a man appear ahead of the coach?"

"From which window, sir?"

"The one on the left."

"You fired twice?"

"I fired four times, sir."

"From the left window?"

"Yes, sir."

"You saw two men?"

"At first I saw but two."

"Mounted or on foot?"

"Both mounted, sir."

"And your four shots killed one outlaw and one horse, wounding another outlaw and a second horse?"

"Such is my belief, sir."

"Then you were fired upon?"

"Yes, the coach was."

"From what position?"

"The cliffs; but may I ask, Mr. Cody, how this is going to aid you in running down the outlaws?"

"I desire to know how many outlaws were there, sir, if I can get at it, how many were mounted and on foot, and about how many shots were fired?"

"There were, to the best of my recollection, nine outlaws, and I saw but two mounted, while the first fire from them was a volley of say a dozen shots, and this killed the driver and my fellow passenger."

"Some scattering shots followed into the coach and one wounded me."

"Then I surrendered and that ended the affair except the robbing of the bodies, and taking my money and luggage."

"You were then allowed to go upon your way, sir?"

"Yes, I was told to mount to the box and drive on, which I did, and a couple of hours after you overtook me."

"Is there any other information that I can give you, Mr. Cody, for I am wholly at your service?"

"I thank you, sir, none; but the whole band of Will-o'-the-Wisps must have been on the scene of the hold-up, from what you say, and yet I cannot, nor could Surgeon Powell or any of my scouts, find the slightest clew to the trail of more than one horse leaving the spot, while but three came there, and they arrived from the direction of the south."

"We must go back and camp on that trail until we can do better," said Buffalo Bill.

"I wish you success, sir, most assuredly."

"Thank you, sir, and some day it will come our way," was the answer, and Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell left the headquarters together.

"Well, Doc."

"There were just seventeen bullet-holes in the coach, Bill."

"And fired from on a level with it, almost?"

"Yes."

"And the outlaw was killed on the right of the coach, not the left?"

"Yes."

"And the horses?"

"One in front of the team, the other on the right."

"Well, Doc, I shall go back to-night with my men, and camp on that trail, and you see if you can get any more information here."

"I will."

And that night Buffalo Bill and his men again started upon the war-path against the Will-o'-the-Wisps.

CHAPTER XLII.

A RECOGNITION.

THAT Austin Marvin was becoming a very popular man at the fort there was not the slightest doubt.

He had traveled much, and knew men and countries.

He had read extensively deep as well as shallow literature, and could talk well.

Then he could tell a good story, without laughing at it himself, and thus showing the listeners where they were expected to ha-ha.

With a voice of rare melody of tone, he could bring tears to the eyes of those who listened to his pathos in song, while a certain vein of sadness running through his nature, gave a charm to his manners.

Arriving at the fort as a hero he had been most modest, and only after he had been there a week did he consent to meet any of the ladies.

He had seen them at a distance, had heard them spoken of, but appeared to shun ladies' society.

But at last Lieutenant Vassar Turpin, who

had taken the stranger under his especial wing, gained his consent to meet several of the ladies.

There was in the fort, upon the bluffs, a small park, which the officer's wives had taken much pleasure in improving by planting flowers and otherwise making it attractive.

A lawn tennis court; and croquet grounds occupied one space, and rustic arbors and settees were scattered about.

There was an acre of fine timber land and altogether the half-dozen acres forming The Bluffs, was a most attractive spot.

Hither had Lieutenant Turpin taken Austin Marvin one afternoon.

It was early and but one lady was visible in the grounds and she turned down a walk which carried her away from the two gentlemen, though it did not appear to be done on purpose to avoid them.

"Who is that charming lady, Turpin?" asked Marvin, as he had a good view of her face and figure.

"That is our reigning belle of the post, though I admit that she has a rival."

"Who is she?"

"Miss Clarice Carr, a Southerner and a beauty, as you see."

"She is indeed, in face and form."

"She will be at the reception at the club to-night, so you will meet her there, though had the opportunity been offered I would have been glad to introduce you now."

"And her rival?"

"Is Miss Nina De Sutro, a Mexican girl Americanized."

"I see, and a beauty and an heiress of course."

"She is both, but hers is not the beauty of the fair Clarice to my thinking, nor has she so large a fortune, for Miss Carr is immensely wealthy and has her property under her own control."

"A good catch, surely, but I suppose she is entangled."

"If you mean engaged, no, I am sorry to say."

"Ah! the shoe pinches with you, does it?"

"I confess it in confidence, though I have no hope of winning, she has been frank enough to tell me."

"Thanks, for your confidence, old fellow; but is that orderly seeking you?"

"Doubtless, and if so, remain in the grounds, looking about, for I suppose I shall not be detained long and I will return and join you."

The orderly approached and saluting said:

"Colonel Dunwoody's compliments, Lieutenant Turpin, and he would like to see you at headquarters, sir."

"I will report at once, orderly," and leaving Marvin to stroll about The Bluffs, the officer departed.

Austin Marvin walked leisurely toward a summer-house upon the Bluffs, where a fine of the river view and the country beyond could be had.

He saw a hammock among the trees, and thought he would stretch himself in it for awhile and enjoy the balmy air.

As he passed by the arbor he stopped, raised his hat politely, for a lady was there, seated in a rustic chair, a novel in her hand.

She sprung to her feet as her eyes met his, and her face turned deadly pale, while she said in a voice that was hoarse with emotion:

"You have tracked me here?"

"Nina De Sutro, we have met again," was the calm reply of the man, and he leaned against the arbor post, where he could command a view of any one approaching them.

"Alas, yes, we have met again."

"I believe you were dead."

"I do not believe you, Nina."

"Do you believe that I would lie to you?"

"After a retrospective glance I will say that I know that you would."

"Ha! you insult me?"

"Beware, for Mexican blood is hot you know."

"Yes, I know."

"But I also know the hottest blood can be cooled."

"You threaten me?"

"I have come to the fort to have a talk with you, Nina."

"You know no one here, do you?" she asked, anxiously.

"I came here a stranger and they took me in."

"I have been treated most royally the few days that I have been here."

"Ah! a light breaks in upon me now—you are Austin Marvin?" she said slowly and with deep emphasis upon the last words.

"Yes, whom you knew as Austin Martin in Mexico."

"Oh! would to God that I had never, never known you," and with a moan the woman dropped back into her chair and buried her face in her hands, a picture of beautiful despair.

CHAPTER XLIII.

OLD FRIENDS.

"AND I could say the same, Nina," the man rejoined after gazing upon the woman a moment with a strange look in his eyes.

She arose quickly and with flashing eyes.

He met her gaze seriously, and listened in silence while she passionately said:

"Austin Marvin, you dragged me when drowning from the waters of the Rio Grande, and saved me from death."

"I looked up into the face of my rescuer and I was dazzled, fascinated by the manly beauty I beheld there."

"I was but a girl then, scarcely more than fifteen, and you won my heart from that moment."

"You parted from me, and those under whose care I was, and whom you had also saved from death when our horses got beyond their depth, and I did not see you for months again."

"It was at a tournament in Mexico, where the Mother Superior had allowed several of the scholars to go with proper escort.

"One man in mask, a Mexican officer, had disarmed and vanquished all adversaries."

"At last he cast his defiance down to meet any foe."

"That man was one whom those who were my guardians expected me to marry."

"I admired him, but I did not love him, but I intended to accept my fate when I left the school I was attending."

"The challenge was accepted, and you, my rescuer, my hero, entered the arena."

"Ah, Austin, it was said that it was an accident that he fell by your hand, but I know now that you killed him on purpose."

"Need I say that you were still more my hero, and was I, a weak young girl, to blame when I met you clandestinely, and at last, urged to become your wife, ran off with you one night from the school?"

"Austin, I would have made you a loving wife until death did us part, but alas! you tired of me so soon, so very soon, and when you found that my property was tied up according to American law, until I was twenty-one, and I was in the care of my guardian, Colonel De Sutro, until then, you cruelly deserted me, fled from me forever."

"I tracked you, and you bade me go my way, that you would go yours, and thus we parted, as I believed, forever."

"I had but one course to pursue, and that was to return to the school, confess all, and make my peace as best I could with Colonel De Sutro and my sister."

"They never knew even the name of the man I married, and they have faithfully kept my secret to this day."

"Two years ago I saw your name in the paper as having been killed in Texas, and the shock was a cruel one to me, for I loved you still, and I lay ill for long weeks after."

"And yet I could not make up my mind to believe it, Austin, and now I see how false it was, for now we meet again."

"Yes, we meet again, Nina."

"And why are you here, Austin, again crossing my path, when I had schooled myself to look upon you as dead?"

"I have come here to see you, Nina."

"Why?"

"I cannot explain to you now, for it is a long story; but let me say this now, that you must speak of me as an old friend, one whom you met in Mexico, and that will give us a chance to be much together, and cause no more comment than that we may be lovers, or become such."

"I did love you once, Austin, how much let my actions be the proof; but now I tell you frankly that the past is dead, is buried, irrevocably on my part."

"But you will do as I ask you, and say that we are friends, were friends in the long ago?"

"No, I cannot do that, Austin."

"And why not?"

He spoke in a tone no longer gentle now."

"Because you are nothing to me now."

"You are my wife."

"In law, yes, but that tie I will sever, have severed, for you are dead to me, I tell you."

"And I say that you shall not thus get rid of me, that you must hear all I have to say."

"It is too late to plead now, Austin Martin, or Marvin, which ever name you prefer?" and she spoke bitterly now.

The man's face darkened and he replied:

"I am known as Austin Marvin here alone."

"But again I tell you, Nina, that you must do as I say."

"And I say that I will not."

"Beware of making a false step before you know why I am here, before you hear what I have to say."

"I can make no step so false as the one when I became your wife."

"Do you wish it known that you are my wife?"

"No! no! no!" and she looked up with a face that was frightened now.

"Then do as I tell you."

"You would not dare confess that I was your wife, and that I had been so cruelly deserted by you, when you found out that my property would not be in my keeping for years."

"You do not know what I would not do, Nina De Sutro, and I ask you once more if you will be guided in this matter by me, and claim to have known me in Mexico?"

"No."

"Very well, here comes Lieutenant Vassar Turpin, returning for me, and I will tell him that in Nina De Sutro I recognize my wife, who years ago deserted me most cruelly in Mexico, and—"

"No! no! I will yield, yes, I will do as you tell me, Austin," she pleaded in a voice quivering with emotion.

"You are wise," was the low reply, and the man turned to meet Lieutenant Turpin who just then approached the arbor.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE ROMANCE.

"Ah, Mr. Marvin, I find you in charming company I see," said Lieutenant Turpin as he approached the arbor and saw who was there with Austin Marvin.

"You find me in charming company indeed, lieutenant, and the lady is one I little dreamed of meeting here, for in Mexico I knew her by the name of her family, and not by that, as she now tells me; Colonel De Sutro."

"Yes, Lieutenant Turpin, Miss De Sutro and I are old friends."

Nina De Sutro was herself again now.

She was the brilliant, fascinating woman the lieutenant had ever found her.

There was the trace of a shadow upon her face or in her words, as she said:

"Yes, Lieutenant Turpin, you have heard me speak of my unknown hero, one who saved me and my escort from being drowned in the Rio Grande, when I was going to Mexico to attend boarding-school."

"Oh, yes, Miss Nina, you told me the story soon after I met you, and spoke of meeting your hero afterward at a tournament where he accepted a challenge from a noted swordsman and in the combat killed him by a misstep of his foe which threw him upon the point of his weapon."

"Yes, and the Señor Marvin is the one who rescued me and whom I afterward held the victor at the tournament."

"Indeed?"

"How strange that you did not recall his name when you heard it here as the hero of the coach robbery?"

"You must know," was the ready reply of the woman, "that I met the Señor Marvin only at the time of my rescue, and again when I saw him at the tournament, only for a few minutes and his name was not published at the combat, he appearing simply as an unknown."

"Ah, yes, but you recognized him when you met him to-day?"

"Oh yes, we knew each other at a glance," the man said.

"I saw the hammock there, and was coming to enjoy a *siesta* until your return when I came face to face with Miss De Sutro, whom I little dreamed to be here."

"How romantic!"

"If we only had some author at the fort to make a novel of this pretty romance," said the lieutenant.

Thus they talked for some while, and then walked along the bluff.

Others were beginning to come out upon The Bluffs, and Lieutenant Turpin said:

"You are in for it now, Marvin, so must meet some of the ladies."

"It will be easier for you to-night, at the reception, unless you forget their faces and names, and women never forgive that, you know."

"Yes, there is the loveliest woman at the fort, by all odds," said Nina.

"You shall know her."

"I am flattered by having it said that she is my rival."

"Come, Señor Marvin, I must be the one to introduce you, for perhaps I can make a match for you," and Nina De Sutro slipped her arm within that of Austin Marvin, and with the lieutenant upon the other side, walked toward where stood Clarice Carr, with half a dozen officers about her, one of whom was Surgeon Frank Powell.

"Miss Carr, I have come to present to you an old friend of mine, a gentleman whom I just discovered that I knew—Mr. Austin Marvin, of Mexico."

"Pardon me, but of Cuba now," and Austin Marvin greeted Clarice Carr in the courtly manner of a man of the world.

"You had a sad experience, Mr. Marvin, in reaching the fort, but I trust now we can all make you forget it," Clarice said, pleasantly.

"Indeed it was an experience, but for my having lost my baggage, which would soon have been obliterated from my memory, Miss Carr."

"But let me tell you a romance, for I just learned it, and it is too good to keep; in fact I cannot keep it any longer," broke in Vassar Turpin.

"It is not about yourself, Turpin, or you would never tell it," said the Surgeon Scout.

"That is a fact, Powell; but this is too good to remain longer unknown, and it is about Miss De Sutro and Marvin here, for they are old friends."

"Old friends?" cried all in chorus.

"Yes, or that is—say, Miss Nina, you tell it or I will get it all mixed up."

All laughed at this and appealed to Nina De Sutro for the story.

Without a glance at Austin Marvin she told how their driver had gotten the horses beyond their depth in crossing the Rio Grande and then a horseman came to their rescue, saving the lives of the nun, under whose charge she was, and herself, though the driver was drowned.

The hero then drove them to the nearest hacienda and left them, to again cross her path at a tournament at the City of Mexico half a year after, and a description of which she gave most vividly.

She had hardly more than seen her hero and rescuer again, when she was taken back to her school and he went his way.

"And you never met again until to-day?" asked Clarice Carr of Austin Marvin.

But he appeared not to hear the question, though he gave a quick glance at Nina, who said, while her face flushed:

"Never until to-day."

"That romance will end in a marriage, Miss Carr," said Turpin a short while after to Clarice.

"No, it will not," was the very decided response of Surgeon Powell who was with the lieutenant and Clarice.

CHAPTER XLV.

HIS REASON.

The story of "Nina's romance," as it was called, spread like the wind over the fort, so that when the time of the evening reception came at the club, it was known by every one.

Colonel De Sutro had met Austin Marvin

on several occasions, but as soon as Nina returned home and told himself and his wife, that he was the "unknown hero," for she had never claimed that he was the one whom she had secretly wedded, he went at once to Marvin's quarters to call upon him.

"My dear sir, I have just heard of the fact that you and Nina had met before, and that she owes to you her life

"We have often spoken of that narrow escape, and wondered whatever became of her hero."

"I am indeed glad to be able to thank you, Mr. Marvin."

Austin Marvin received the thanks of Colonel De Sutro pleasantly, but made reply that he was afraid that he was receiving far more honor than he deserved.

That night he appeared at the reception in a full-dress suit, which an officer had just received new, and which he took off of his hands.

He certainly was a very distinguished-looking man in full dress, and handsome as well.

Easy in manners, courtly, always self-possessed, he received the praise bestowed upon him by the ladies in a way that won with them from his modesty of mien.

"It will be no use setting our caps for him, for Nina must carry out her romance by marrying him," said a captain's pretty daughter.

"Who knows but that he is already married?" another remarked.

"We must find out at once."

"Why? for if he is here only for a short while, he can flirt when married, even better than a single man can."

"Don't spoil Nina's romance by making him out a married man."

"But isn't he handsome?"

"Does he not dance divinely?"

"And the officers say he is a charming companion."

"But all I have heard speak of him have felt sure that he had some great sorrow."

"Perhaps it is killing his adversary in the Mexican tournament."

"Maybe he is in love."

"And it was not requited."

"Bosh! that man could win the love of almost any woman, I should think."

"I am half in love with him myself," said a young miss of fifteen, and just then Austin Marvin came up and claimed her for a waltz.

She glanced with a look of triumph at the bevy of girls she had just left, and seemed perfectly happy.

Soon after, Austin Marvin was seen dancing with Nina De Sutro.

Every eye was upon them and many were the comments made regarding their good looks.

But when afterward he danced with Clarice Carr there were more comments made in their favor, for they appeared perfectly suited to each other.

They danced in perfect unison together, and when he led her to her seat he said:

"You are the best dancer I ever met, Miss Carr."

"Thank you, and permit me to say quite as much for you."

"I am out of practice now, but I was always fond of dancing, and in Mexico and Cuba, where I have passed so much of my time, it is a delightful pastime."

"To see a Cuban or Mexican woman dance is, to my mind, the poetry of motion, and that is why I said what I did of you, for you dance as they do."

Soon after he offered his arm to Nina De Sutro to conduct her to supper, for in spite of its being on the far frontier the officers managed to get hold of many of the luxuries of life.

After supper, as the moon was up, Nina said:

"Take me for a stroll upon the Bluffs."

"Would it be wise?"

"Why not?"

"If you wish it, yes."

He offered his arm, after throwing a fleecy wrap about her shoulders, and she led the way to a spot on the Bluffs where no one could get near to them without being seen.

Twice she led him away from a bench, or an arbor, for as she said:

"I do not wish our secret known."

"I am indifferent about it."

"Now tell me why you came here?"

"To see you."
 "Indeed, and for what reason?"
 "How old are you now, Nina?"
 "I will be twenty-one my next birthday."
 "When will that be?"
 "In just eight months."
 "Why do you ask?"
 "Then you will come in control of your property, will you not?"
 "I will."

Then she added:

"Yes, I will be the mistress then of about a quarter of million dollars: a good catch, eh, for some good man?"

He laughed, and it seemed to grate upon her, for she said, turning suddenly upon him:

"My God! I have been so long here that I forget that I am in chains."

"Chains that are most galling to me."

"But I believe now I see your motive in keeping me here, after all these years, Austin Marvin?"

"Well, what is my motive?"

"To claim me as your wife, or force me to wed you again."

"You are right, that is just my motive, Nina, to claim you as my wife," was the cool reply of the man.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE PRICE OF A BROKEN BOND.

NINA DE SUTRO gazed fixedly at the man a moment before she replied to his last words.

At last the secret was out of why he had come to the fort.

He was in need of money, and she was his wife.

He had deserted her years ago when he found he could not gain control of her money, but now it was but a short while before she would come in full possession of it all.

Now he would claim her as his wife and then all would be well—for him.

Her face paled as she thought of this, and at last she said:

"You expect to claim me as your wife, do you?"

"I do."

"I would sooner die than have it so."

"But you appear to be in most excellent health."

"I am, but I would take my own life first."

"Thus leaving to me your entire fortune."

"I would will it away."

"You are in America you know."

"Well?"

"I would break your will by our laws."

"My God! can this be?"

"Consult your lawyer for facts," he said, indifferently.

"Oh, what shall I do?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Yes, if you can tell me aught to save me from you."

"That is what I came for."

"I will be so glad to know."

"You say your fortune is worth a quarter of a million?"

"Yes."

"I thought it was more."

"It was just that, the interest and profits going to my guardian for my support and his care of me."

"Then there is none of the interest laid up in these years?"

"None, for me."

"What will your guardian do?"

"How do you mean?"

"He will no longer have your interest."

"He has invested it and made some money for himself, and he has his pay as well."

"Will he give your fortune into your keeping when you are twenty-one?"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"Of course, for he cannot hold it a day after."

"Of what does your fortune consist?"

"Of United States bonds, railroad stocks, some houses in New York City and the balance in banks."

"How much have you in banks?"

"Just one hundred thousand dollars."

"You wish to know what can rid you of me?"

"I do."

"You are willing to pay for the ride?"

"Willingly."

"Are you willing to pay liberally?"

"I am."

"Well, write me checks, due the day after you are twenty one, for the money in those banks, one hundred thousand dollars."

The proposition was coolly made, and one would have supposed that it would have a stunning effect upon Nina De Sutro.

Instead she said with the utmost sang-froid:

"Do you mean it?"

"I do."

"For one hundred thousand dollars you will shoot yourself through the heart?"

"I did not say that I would be such a fool."

"Then that I might kill you, or hire a man to kill you?"

"Oh, no."

"What then?"

"I said I would rid myself of you."

"How?"

"By divorce."

"Divorce?"

"Yes."

"How can that be?"

"I will go to Chicago and live for a short while, claiming my residence there, and I will put in a plea for divorce from you."

"Publicly?"

"Not unless you wish it so."

"I am paying for riddance of you, and secrecy."

"Well, I can put in the plea of desertion, and place you under your maiden name, as when you wedded me."

"I can pay well for it, and thus get a decree of divorce, you know."

"And when can you get this divorce?"

"By the time you reach your twenty-first birthday."

"How will I know about it?"

"I will send you a present by Express, and hidden in the lining of the box will be the decree of the court."

"And that will free me from you?"

"Absolutely."

"For the one hundred thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"How came you to be so generous?"

"How do you mean?"

"Why didn't you say more?"

"I said what I needed."

"Well, I accept your terms, and will give you the checks, payable at the banks, when you send word that value received has been given."

"Which means the divorce?"

"Yes."

"And when you get the papers you will stop the payments of the checks."

"I am not such a villain, if you are."

"Well, I need not worry, for I will still have a claim upon you."

"What claim?"

"You said the divorce would be absolute."

"So it will."

"I do not see your claim, then."

"Just this, Miss De Sutro:

"You expect to play me false, and you wish our marriage to be forever unknown, for you have a reason."

"What reason?"

"You love some one and wish to wed him."

"Our marriage has stood between, but you expect to do so when free."

"Well?"

"As soon as you receive those divorce papers, and those checks are not paid, I will come after you, and tell the story from beginning to end."

"I will give the checks to you and they will be paid."

"Come, let us go in," and she shivered as she took the arm he offered her.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE UNHOLY ALLIANCE.

THE triumphant laugh of the man nettled her, but she felt that she was in his power.

She felt that he had read her aright, for she did love another, and she was struggling to win that other when Austin Marvin again crossed her path.

It was a bitter blow to her, for she had re-

garded him as dead to her, dead to her life, even though she did not in her inmost heart believe that he was really in his grave.

Under other circumstances she would never have known an evil thought.

But her girlhood's love had gone out to one who had saved her life.

He had become her hero and she dreamt of him by day and by night.

Again she met him and again he was her hero.

Then had followed the clandestine meetings, the flight from the convent, in Mexico, secret marriage and soon after the desertion of her by the man she had loved and trusted.

Was it any wonder that her love grew callous, that her heart hardened when he turned her from him a girl wife upon the cruel world?

She made what atonement she could by a confession in part of her sin.

But for a long while life seemed dark indeed to her.

Then one crossed her path whose noble nature won her admiration, her regard and lastly her love.

Her girlhood love was buried in the past, and she determined to live a new life, to live for the man she loved and to win him.

She dared not risk the chance of losing him by a confession of her early life.

She would keep her secret, and she would marry him if she could win him.

Was it a wonder, after all she had gone through with, that her nature had become warped, that the good and the evil could both find a resting place in her breast.

Just then Austin Marvin crossed her path and all seemed like the blackness of night before her.

She must rid herself of that man in any way in her power.

Her heart was full of hatred for him, and her nature was to hate with the same intensity with which she loved.

This man should not divide her life from the one she sought to unite with.

He should not step between her and the only ray of happiness she saw in life.

No, sooner would she take his life than give up her idol now.

Her thoughts were full of hatred, vicious, wicked, and though outwardly calm, inwardly she was suffering the torments of the damned.

Then the secret came out, that the man had come to find her that she might buy him off.

She jumped at the chance, for what was money to her?

She even had then thousands of dollars of interest money she had not been able to spend, and it was kept by her in her desk and no questions asked.

No one, other than her guardian, knew what her fortune amounted to, and certainly a girl with a hundred and fifty thousand dollars was worth the having, she argued, so she would not miss the large sum she bought her freedom with.

The fortune she would bring the man she loved would be a large one for an army officer.

And so she argued it all to herself and in her own way and was glad that she would escape so easily, as she thought.

But the secret marriage must never be known.

Now, that must go down with her to the grave.

As the two now strolled back toward the club-house they avoided others in their walk whom they saw upon the Bluffs.

"When will you give me those checks?" he asked her.

"When do you wish them?"

"I wrote by the coach that left after I came, and when I get a letter it will be time enough."

"You wrote for money?"

"Presumably, but I wrote for what I will not get."

"How will you leave then, and pay your debts off honor here, for you must do that?"

"Of course I must do that."

"I would not have you leave a shame upon me as my friend, as a fraud."

"No indeed, that would never do."

"Then what will you do?"

"I must ask you to be my banker."

"Ah!"

"I will need a few hundreds to square me

here, and get back to Chicago, and then I will have to live there until I get our divorce, and that will cost all of a hundred a month, not to speak of the cost of the attorney's fees and papers, you see, which will amount to several hundreds more."

"You mean that you wish, in addition to those checks, to get from me about fifteen hundred dollars in cash?"

"Yes, about that."

"You shall have it, for I can raise you that sum, so when your letter comes, simply say that your money came with it."

"Thank you, and now, not to make the one you love jealous, I will devote myself while here to some of the very pretty girls at the post."

"Do so, and I will be obliged; but before all we must still be the best of friends."

"Oh, yes, outwardly," and they entered the club-house and whirled away in a waltz as they crossed the threshold.

CHAPTER XLVII.

AFFAIRS AT POCKET CITY.

THERE was a wild rumor going the rounds of Pocket City, upon the morning following the game of cards between Bonnie Belle and Thorny.

It was to the effect that the Hangman's Gulch was haunted beyond all doubt.

Two miners, both of them known to be men who were not easily frightened, had started out at night for a couple of days' hunt in the mountains, and were going by Hangman's Gulch, when they had come face to face with a form robed in white.

They had hailed it, and received no reply.

Then they had covered it with their revolvers, but it still came toward them.

Determined to know just what it was, they had both taken deliberate aim and fired.

Then they saw that the form was unhurt and came straight on toward them.

Again and again they fired, but when they could see no result, they became terrified and fled back to Pocket City.

Such was the story they told, and Mike the storekeeper and one other had seen them flying through Pocket City at the top of their speed, and recognized them as Beaver Bill and Deadly Eye Dick.

The result was that many of the miners, always prone to superstition, were alarmed at this report of ghosts at Hangman's Gulch and believed the story.

Others laughed at it, a number doubted it, yet could not say what it was the two men had fired at, while a few said that it was some one playing a joke upon them.

"Yer durned fool, I'd like ter know who'd joke with me?" said Deadly Eye Dick.

No one present answered this pointed question and Beaver Bill said:

"See here, pard, didn't we tell yer that we emptied our revolvers at it, and not twenty feet away the last shot was fired, so what fool is willing for us to fire at him just for a joke?"

This was the strangest part of it, for both of the men were known to be dead shots.

So the rumor went about the camps, and when night came on there was a larger crowd than usual assembled at Devil's Den to talk the strange occurrence over.

Just at twilight Carroll Dean put in an appearance at The Frying Pan.

Bonnie Belle was seated upon her piazza and greeted him cordially.

"I left my bag of provisions last night, so came after it to-night," he said, by way of excuse.

"You do not have to hurry back, so sit down."

He obeyed, and just then Beaver Bill and Deadly Eye Dick passed upon their way to the Devil's Den, to brace up with a drink as night was coming on, and they began to think of the occurrence of the night before.

"Thar's Deadshot, Bill," said Deadly Eye Dick, in a low tone.

"Yas, come ter spark ther pretty gal and win her money ter-night."

"Shall we tackle him ter-night when he goes home?"

"I know when I has got enough, pard."

"I don't mean at Hangman's Gulch."

"I shu'd say not."

"But whar?"

"Afore he gits thar?"

"No, we'll wait for a few days and consider."

"We'll go off on a hunt, come back that way about night, halt for a talk with him and then do the act."

"That's ther best way."

"But I'd like ter know ef he seen the ghost on his way home."

"We didn't see him, did we, so I s'pose he was late in starting."

The two men passed on to Devil's Den while the miner kept on chatting with Bonnie Belle.

"You have heard the news, Deadshot Dean, have you not?"

"To what news do you refer, Bonnie Belle?"

"That the Hangman's Gulch is really haunted."

"Ah, is that so?"

"It is."

"By whom?"

"Well, I do not vouch for anything more than the story; but you saw the two men who just passed here?"

"Beaver Bill and Deadly Eye Dick?"

"Yes."

"What of them?"

"They are the men who saw the ghost last night."

"At Hangman's Gulch?"

"Yes."

"I am not surprised," and the miner's smile was significant.

"Did you ever see a ghost there, Deadshot?" and Bonnie Belle, asked the question with a seriousness that caused the miner to smile.

"I must confess that I have."

"Do you mean it?"

"Certainly."

"You are about the only man in the mines who would go through Hangman's Gulch at night;"

"I saw a white-robed form there last night."

"Are you joking?"

"No indeed."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Deadshot, for surely you do not?"

"I believe only in physical ghosts; but let me tell you that I have something for you."

"What is it?"

"I played cards at the tables last night."

"So I heard."

"And I won just six hundred dollars, and less the sixty that went to you for commission I have the money here for you."

"See, here it is, just five hundred and forty dollars."

"But you won it."

"True, and you remember our compact?"

"It is not fair toward you."

"Oh, yes, for I won as much from Thorny, and I keep that, of course."

"You are a very strange man, Deadshot Dean."

"I try to be a just one, Bonnie Belle."

"Will you play to-night, at Devil's Den?"

"No, for I came for my bag of provisions, and shall go home; but if you hear anything more about Hangman's Gulch being haunted, let me know, please," and the miner bade Bonnie Belle good-evening, and was soon on his way home.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THORNY'S CHALLENGE.

THE more that Deadshot Dean studied Bonnie Belle the more he found himself at fault regarding her.

At one time he found himself feeling certain that she was a beautiful devil, and again he came to the conclusion that she was more like an angel, and was more sinned against than sinning.

She certainly treated him with the greatest kindness, gave him several warnings that served him well, and yet he could not reconcile her meeting with old man Swain, in Hangman's Gulch, unless she was connected with the outlaws in some way, for certainly he had trailed the old man to the stage trail, where he, with others, had just committed murder and robbery.

"Now what has Bonnie Belle in common with these outlaws?" asked the miner of himself again and again.

She had distributed the money he gave her for charity, that which he had taken from old man Swain, just as he had suggested, and when she sent Barney eastward upon the coach, she had given him some of her own money, besides.

So it was that Bonnie Belle became more and more a puzzle to the miner.

He had gone to the Devil's Den several times again, and on one occasion had played cards with several of those who were skilled players there, and in each instance he had won, for his surprising luck did not desert him.

"I have a remarkable run of luck, and as long as it does not desert me I feel that I will not fail in my other undertakings."

"If luck failed me, I believe I am superstitious enough to dread evil befalling me."

He had worked in the mine also, and to his delight had found it panning out more generously than before for some time.

"I hope I can lay up quite a little fortune within the next year for my loved wife and little boy, for I am so anxious to get back to my home, and never again will anything tempt me to leave it."

His horse had begun to pick up rapidly and was feeling well, and altogether the miner was feeling prosperous and contented, only he had not thus far been able to make any report as he wished to Buffalo Bill of progress made in ferreting out the Will-o'-the-Wisps and their chief Silk Lasso Sam.

One evening he went to Pocket City, as usual on a still hunt for some news about the band of outlaws.

Of late there had not been a coach held up, a miner disturbed, a traveler robbed or horse stolen in the vicinity of Gold Dust Valley.

This was a surprise to all, and Deadshot Dean began to feel that the outlaws were all operating in the neighborhood of Pioneer Post, or some acts of lawlessness would have been heard of about Pocket City.

The story of the ghost of Hangman's Gulch was still being talked over among the miners, but no new developments had been heard of and there were no miners who seemed to particularly care about going to investigate the gulch and its ghostly denizens after nightfall, and Deadshot Dean came in for much admiration as one who dwelt nearest to it than any one else, went by there night after night and appeared to possess no superstitious dread of the place.

"I say, Deadshot Dean, we were talking about Hangman's Gulch" said Thorny, as the miner entered the Devil's Den on the evening in question and passed near the gambler's table, where a group of men were gathered.

"Well, what of it?" asked the miner.

"You pass back and forth at all hours, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Beaver Bill and Deadly Eye Dick here will swear that they saw a ghost there some time ago."

"Well, they should know."

"I don't believe it."

"Don't believe what?"

"That they saw a ghost there."

"Why not?"

"I do not believe in such things."

"Nor do I, yet I have seen a white-robed form strolling about the gulch."

"You have?"

"I have."

"When?"

"The last time I saw it was the night when I beat you in a game of cards."

"That was the night we saw it, pard," cried Beaver Bill, willing to be corroborated by such good authority as was Deadshot Dean.

"Do you mean to say that you believe in such nonsense, Deadshot Dean?" said Thorny the gambler, with a sneer.

"Believe or not, I saw what I told you."

"Well, I wouldn't believe you on oath," gruffly said the gambler, who had felt in an ugly mood toward Deadshot Dean ever since he had lost his money in the game of cards with him.

"Do you mean to say, Gambler Thorny, that I would tell a lie when under oath?" asked the miner?

"Take it so if you wish."

"And you take that back, or I will send a bullet through your heart."

"Quick!"

"I mean what I say."

Those who saw the face of the miner could see that he was in deadly earnest, and no one discovered the fact quicker than did Thorny the gambler, who said:

"I'll play you a game to see whether I take it back or not."

"If you win, I'll ask your pardon, and if I win I'll see you in Hades first."

The miner hesitated an instant, his revolver still covering the gambler.

Then he lowered it suddenly and said:

"It is a bargain."

CHAPTER L.

TWO SHOTS.

ALL interest in the saloon was at once centered upon the two men, with sympathy generally in behalf of the miner, for nearly all present had suffered more or less severely from the hands of the gambler.

It was a strange thing that was to be done, for a man to offer a direct insult and then offer to play a game of cards whether he would apologize or not.

And stranger still for the man insulted to accept such terms.

While the two men were taking seats at the table and preparing for the game, Bonnie Belle came into the saloon, heard what was going on and quickly glided down to a place near the table, motioning to the crowd about her not to make her presence known to the miner and the gambler.

"We will play best two in three," said Thorny, as he drew a pack of cards from the table.

"We will play but one game," was the firm rejoinder of the miner.

"All right, one goes."

"Yes, and we will not play with the pack of cards you have in your hands?"

"Why not?"

"Because I prefer another pack."

"See here, you got Bonnie Belle to discharge Flip from here, because you thought he motioned to me a sign for me to win."

"It is false, for I did not know that he had been discharged; but now that you bring it up I will tell you that I saw him motion to you which choice to make."

"Well, drop that and say if you will play with these cards?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not trust you or your cards either, as you demand a direct answer."

"That's flat-footed enough to leave a track," said one of the crowd.

"You'll answer for that insult after this game is done?"

"We shall see; but let us begin."

"With my cards?"

"With any cards except yours."

Mike the storekeeper here tossed a pack on the table with the remark:

"Take them keeds, gents, for they is honest clean through."

"Will these suit you?" sneered the gambler.

"Yes."

"All right."

With this the gambler cut for deal, and the miner got it.

Then the men began to play slowly, and with marked care.

At last the game, which was a very long one, ended, and the miner was the winner.

"Now, sir, I expect you to apologize, retracting what you said awhile since," said the miner, who appeared rather to seek than avoid trouble with the gambler.

"There is but one way in which I ask pardon," sneered the gambler, and the look in his face showed that he meant mischief, and deadly work at that.

Quick as a flash, he dropped his hands upon his two revolvers, and yet, though the crowd scattered wildly, Deadshot Dean did not flinch, and quick as the gambler had been, he found the miner more so, for a revolver looked him in the face and the words came sternly and in deadly earnest:

"Hands off those pistols, Gambler Thorny!"

Amid a breathless silence, the gambler obeyed, uttering an oath as he did so.

"Now, sir, hands up."

"Quick!"

With another savage oath the hands of Thorny went upward.

"Now ask my pardon for the insult you offered me."

"When a man is situated as I am, he can but obey, Deadshot Dean, so I beg your pardon."

"Enough," and the revolver of the miner was lowered.

Then the gambler showed his treacherous nature, for with a lightning-like movement, as Deadshot Dean turned to walk away, he drew his revolver, and leveling it, pulled trigger.

But a second before he did so, another one present drew a weapon and the flash came before that of the gambler, and the bullet shattered the hand that held the weapon.

But for that shot Deadshot Dean would have been killed.

In an instant he had turned, and as he did so, Thorny had drawn his other revolver with his left hand, and throwing it forward, cried in a voice of thunder:

"You shall die for that act, girl!"

Again a sharp report came, this time once more a second before Thorny could pull trigger, and though his revolver exploded it was fired at random, for the bullet flew wide of its intended target.

But not so was it with the one who fired in time to save the life of Bonnie Belle, who a moment before had broken the gambler's arm with a bullet from her revolver, for his record as Deadshot Dean was maintained as Thorny dropped dead in his tracks, a dark red stain directly between the eyes showing that the miner's aim had been unfailing.

A moment there was a hush upon the assembled miners, and then a voice cried:

"Thorny got his dose, Bonnie Belle, for he drew his gun ter shoot Deadshot in ther back, and 'cause you saved him, then he meant ter kill you."

"Hurrah for Deadshot Dean."

A wild roar that fairly made the shanty quiver went up from the crowd, and in the midst of the excitement Deadshot Dean slipped out of the saloon and hastened homeward.

CHAPTER LI.

A CLOSE CALL.

IT was the afternoon after the death of Thorny the gambler at the hands of Deadshot Dean, that the latter was seated in front of his cabin smoking his pipe, having just finished his supper.

He was musing to himself, as was his custom, and after this manner:

"What is it that holds me longer to this wild land?

"I have sent home a fair sum of money, enough to start in business with upon my return, with what I have here, and I long to see my loved wife and little son."

"Yet some strange fascination holds me to this spot, full of cruel memories and red deeds."

"Much as I abhor taking human life, it seems to have been my destiny to have to raise my hand against my fellow-man, ever since I came to the mines."

"Heaven knows that I have not done so ruthlessly, and regret that it has been so; but I saw, I knew that Thorny intended to get revenge on me, to kill me because I had won his money the other night, and would not play with his marked cards."

"Why, that fellow Flip was his ally, and the cards he brought him were marked, and so plainly that I took but a few minutes to find it out."

"Had I not fired as I did last night the gambler would have killed Bonnie Belle, and I owe my life to her, for her shot broke the man's arm and thus saved me."

"She was quick as lightning too and saw his treachery, which I did not think he dared show there."

"Well, he lies up on Sunset Hill in his grave, and who will be the next I wonder?

"If I had not promised Buffalo Bill to be a spy on this valley to find out who in these camps were the allies of Silk Lasso Sam, I would leave here at once."

"And what have I discovered?

"Next to nothing, it seems, except that that old man was a fraud and one of the band, if not the chief himself, and that Bonnie Belle is in some way allied to the outlaws, though it is hard for me to believe it of her."

"Had my own eyes not revealed it to me, I would never have believed it upon the say-so of others."

"Well, I suppose I must see the end of it all now, as it would be cowardly for me to desert now before the band of outlaws is run down."

"Yes, I will—"

But a shot cut short his musings, a puff of smoke from over the ridge a hundred yards away showing from whence the bullet had come.

And with a waving of his arms the miner fell backward from his seat and lay in a heap upon the ground.

Then over the edge of the ridge came the form of a man.

He peered cautiously at the miner for full a moment, and then came forward with light tread.

He drew near, and bending over glanced down upon the motionless form.

The miner lay partly upon his face, like one who had fallen dead on the instant.

"Dead! dead! and I have my revenge."

"Now to get his gold and fly far from here, for he has a horse that will carry me rapidly away."

So said the man, and he started to enter the cabin to carry out his intention, when with a leap like a panther the miner was upon his back, a blow felled him to the earth, and a revolver was thrust into his face while the words came sharply:

"I am not dead yet, Pard Flip."

"It was a good shot, for the bullet grazed my temple, and now you are my prisoner."

"Mercy, Deadshot Dean, mercy!"

"Don't kill me, I beseech you!"

"I would not stain my hands with such coward blood as flows through your veins, Flip."

"But you have got to tell me what I would know, or I will take you up to Pocket City and tell the men just what you did, and intended doing, and they will very quickly bring you back as far as Hangman's Gulch and give you a lift in the world."

"Mercy, Deadshot, I beg of you."

"Then do as I ask you."

"I will, oh, I will."

"Did you not have an agreement with Thorny the gambler to furnish him marked cards?"

"I did."

"Bonnie Belle knew nothing of this?"

"Nothing, I swear it."

"You need not swear, for your oath is no better than your word."

"Yes, sir."

"Now what was Thorny to you?"

"He was my friend, for he got me the place at Devil's Den."

"And you gave him tips of who had money?"

"Yes."

"Now who was Thorny?"

"A gambler."

"I know that; but what else was he?"

The man was silent.

"I guess I'll have to let the men up at Pocket City question you."

"No, oh, no!"

"If you answer me as I know you can, I will let you go free as soon as I discover what I wish to know."

"I will."

"What else was Thorny besides a gambler?"

"I am not sure, but I think he was—"

"What?"

"A spy of Silk Lasso Sam."

"You do not know this?"

"I am not sure, for he never told me so, but I know that he met strange men who came to the camps, and always after these visits the outlaws would rob a coach, or a miner, I know."

"I see; but did he have any secret talk with the old man who came here some time ago?"

"No, but I am sure the old man was an outlaw, and I think he was a spy upon Gambler Thorny," was the reply of Flip.

CHAPTER LII.

A DEEP-DYED VILLAIN.

THE words of the prisoner Flip set Deadshot to thinking.

He saw that it was very possible that the gambler Thorny, being a spy of the road-

agent chief, might have a spy set upon him for certain acts he had committed, or had left undone.

That spy was doubtless the old man Swain, as I must speak of him without proof that he was not what he represented himself to be.

But wherein had Bonnie Belle been interested?

Was she in the secret with the old man against Thorny, and did she and the gambler have a guilty knowledge in partnership of the outlaws' doings?

It was certain that though a good customer of The Frying Pan, Bonnie Belle did not like the gambler.

That much the miner had had ocular demonstration of.

Still there must be something between the two if Flip was right, and both were allies of the Will-o'-the-Wisps.

But was Flip telling all that he knew?

The miner thought from the man, as he saw and knew him, that he was.

His mind was not a brilliant one by any means, he had no character, and upon his face was plainly written that he was for sale.

He was hardly the man that Thorny, an astute villain, would trust with a secret which involved so much as showing him to be Silk Lasso Sam's spy.

Having considered these things the miner asked:

"Do you know what the old man's business with Bonnie Belle was?"

"I don't, more than she wanted to help him because he was in hard luck, for that is her style, and I am surprised she discharged me."

"You believe her to be a square, good woman do you not?"

"I does."

"Then that is why she did not wish a thief, or a traitor in her employ."

"You were paid by her, so why did you do that for the gambler which brought discredit upon her business?"

"He paid me well."

"I see."

"Now tell me what you wished to kill me for?"

"Well, you see I was discharged because you found me helping Thorny, and then he was the one who did the most for me and you killed him."

"And so you wished to be doubly avenged, for yourself and for him?"

"Just so."

"You should have aimed a little more to the right and your bullet would have entered my forehead."

"That's what I aimed for, but it is no easy thing to take dead aim when you are shooting to kill a human being."

"You have found that out, eh?"

"Yes."

"When I let you go what will you do?"

"Go back to Pocket City."

"If you do I shall put the Vigilantes after you."

"Oh Lord!"

"You are to go back and get your things, then leave the camps at daylight to-morrow, for if the sunrise finds you there you will have me to settle with."

"I'll go."

"You have money, have you not?"

"Mighty little."

"You were paid off by Bonnie Belle and because you were discharged Thorny said last night that he had given you a hundred dollars and wished me to do the same."

"As you have kept your wages and neither drink or gamble you must be well supplied with funds."

"I hasn't but about sixty dollars."

"Hands up!"

"Now I shall see."

Quickly the miner searched the trembling wretch and found a belt worn under his shirt, and held by suspenders in place.

It was heavy with gold and other things, which were emptied out upon the table.

"Flip, you are a scientific liar, for you expected me to help you."

"Here are five hundred dollars in gold, twice that sum in bills and some jewelry, two watches and—yes, here is a ring and a locket which I have seen Bonnie Belle wear."

"I did intend to set you free, and to give you some money too, as I thought you might

be in hard luck; but now I think I shall turn you over to the Vigilantes."

"Lord have mercy!"

"But you promised that you would let me go if I would only tell you all I knew."

"I did so promise, but I wish to know what you can tell before I keep my word."

"I don't know anything more, for somehow folks do not confide much in me."

"I don't wonder; but tell me where you got this jewelry?"

"Stole it."

"That confession ought to do your soul good."

"This I recognize as Bonnie Belle's, and the other I shall also take and put up a notice that I have such property and the owner can get it by coming after it."

"The money of course I will not touch, nor will I now allow you to return to the camps."

"There is your trail, so take it, and I shall see that you do not steal my horse to-night, while I will report your thefts and if the Vigilantes take your trail in the morning you will have to travel fast to keep out of their way."

"Now I'll give you some provisions and start you."

CHAPTER LIII.

BONNIE BELLE MAKES A CALL.

GETTING some provisions together, and a few matches the miner put them in a bag and went with Flip to the spot where he had fired upon him from ambush.

There he found an old knapsack, walking-stick, a roll of blankets and some food.

"Ahl you had already said farewell to the camps, I see."

"Now, sir, the longer you remain in my sight the more I long to kill you, so I will give you just time to get beyond that bend in the trail, before I act."

"Now go!"

The man was as white as death now, for he saw that the miner was losing all patience with him, and he began rapidly to gather his traps.

"Good-bye, and thank you," he said as he started to go.

But Deadshot did not reply and the villain started off at a double-quick.

He soon disappeared around the bend of the trail, glancing back as he did so, but making a mighty spring when he saw the miner throw his rifle to his shoulder as though to fire.

Walking to the bend and ascending to the top of a ridge which gave him a view of the trail for a mile or more, Deadshot Dean beheld the now thoroughly terrified Flip making rapid time to place all the distance possible between himself and danger before night should set in.

Returning to his cabin the miner reached there just as he heard the clatter of hoofs coming along the trail from Pocket City.

"Who can that be, I wonder?" he said, and a moment after Bonnie Belle dashed into view.

She turned up the path to the miner's cabin, and drawing rein said pleasantly:

"Ah, Deadshot Dean, I am glad to find you at home."

"Will you dismount, Bonnie Belle?"

"No, thank you, for I must get back before dark, for I am afraid of the ghosts of the Haughman's Gulch, though you appear not to be."

"I was reared not to have fear of anything, Bonnie Belle, and I have always tried to cultivate that feeling."

"As I have had reason to do; but I have come to see you on a special errand, Deadshot Dean."

"Yes, you are welcome, whatever your mission."

"Thank you; but let me say that I have come to warn you of a treble danger."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, there is one who intends to kill you, or at least he made the threat, for I discharged him when I found that he was an ally of Thorny the gambler, and a thief."

"I cannot tolerate one who would steal, and cheat, and so I sent him away when I discovered that he was in the pay of Thorny."

"He holds you responsible for it, and he told Hong Kong, my Chinee cook, that he intended to kill you."

"You refer to Felip?"

"Yes."

"He has been here."

"What?"

"He made his mark—see," and the miner pointed to the bullet imbedded in the log, just where his head had rested.

"I was seated in that chair, and it was a close call, for you see the bullet just grazed my temple."

"Yes, I see the mark."

"But where is the fellow?"

"I advised him to take the trail for other parts, and he took my advice."

"He was wise; but I suppose he went by the underground trail," and Bonnie Belle pointed significantly at the ground.

"Oh, no, I did not kill him," said the miner, with a smile, understanding that she supposed he was in his grave.

"You were merciful."

"I played possum, and he came here believing he had killed me, and to rob me."

"I caught him, had a talk with him, and turned him loose."

"He is a cunning rascal, and will get along."

"He lied to me about having no money, so I searched him, and found he had over a thousand dollars, along with some things he had stolen."

"These are yours, I believe?"

As he spoke the miner held up to her a ring, locket and chain and a bracelet.

She uttered a cry of amazement, sorrow and delight commingled, for she was astonished to see her treasures in the possession of the miner, pained at their loss, when she deemed them safely locked up in her quarters at The Frying Pan, and delighted at recovering them again.

"Oh! where did you get them?" and the tears came into her eyes.

"From Flip, as I said to you."

"He stole them from me."

"Beyond doubt."

"They were locked up in a secret receptacle in my room, and which I believed no one knew of."

"He spied on you I suppose, and when you were out picked the lock."

"Yes, and there was in the drawer five hundred dollars in twenty-dollar gold pieces."

"Just the sum the fellow had, and in gold twenties."

"But that I did not take away from him."

"I would willingly pay far more to get these back again."

"But it is your money, and I'll go after him, and—"

"Which trail did he take?"

"That one."

Like a flash the girl darted away, going down the steep path at breakneck speed.

But she was a perfect horsewoman and had a splendid horse, so wheeled into the valley trail in safety and went flying along in pursuit of Flip.

The horse of the miner was in some meadow land a quarter of a mile away, which he had poled in to keep him in, and he knew that it would be useless to follow on foot, so could only await her return.

CHAPTER LIV.

REDEEMED.

LIKE a deer the horse of Bonnie Belle sped on after the thief Flip, and suddenly came upon that worthy taking a drink at a brook.

The soft meadow land had kept him from hearing the approach of the horse until he was almost upon him.

He sprung up in terror, believing the miner had repented of his mercy, and came after him to kill him, or deliver him up to the Vigilantes of Gold Dust Valley.

He was heated and tired from his fast travel, and turned to find the revolver of Bonnie Belle covering him, and heard the words of Bonnie Belle:

"Hands up, Flip, you thief, for I am in a dangerous mood!"

The man was trembling with terror, his hands shaking as he held them high above his head.

"Now I wish to know where the things are you stole from me?"

"I gave them to the miner, Deadshot Dean."

"What did you steal?"

"A bracelet, locket and chain and a ring."

"Was that all?"
 "Yes."
 "Tell me the truth."
 "There was some gold."
 "How much?"
 "About five hundred dollars, I guess."
 "Where is it?"
 "I gave it to the miner, too."
 "You did not; so, hand it over to me, or you'll get lead in exchange for gold."
 "I'll do it," and with trembling fingers the man obeyed.
 "There, that is it, and they are all here, just as you took them.
 "Now how did you get into that secret draw in the wall?"
 "Thorny did it."
 "The gambler?"
 "Yes."
 "When?"
 "He watched when you were away, for I kept him posted, and lowered himself from his window into your yard, for the trees there kept any one from seeing him.
 "He had skeleton keys and opened the drawer, and he gave me the keys to go and help myself, and I did."
 "But he stole nothing himself?"
 "No."
 "Why not?"
 "He was looking for something else."
 "What else?"
 "Papers."
 "What papers?"
 "I don't know."
 "You do."
 "I do not."
 "Answer me!"
 "Well, don't point that revolver at me for it might go off, for women can't hold a steady hand."
 "Compare mine with yours now and see."
 "But answer me."
 "He thought you had papers that might prove who you were."
 "Ah!"
 "He wanted to know, so he would hold trumps against you."
 "That was his game, was it?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, he found no papers?"
 "So he said."
 "He found nothing to give him a clew as to who I am."
 "That's what he told me."
 "Then he told you to steal my treasure."
 "Yes."
 "Well, I ought to take you back and make a present of you to the Vigilantes, but I will spare you as I have gotten back my treasures and my money.
 "Now, who was this man Thorny?"
 "A gambler."
 "I know that much."
 "But what else was he?"
 "Silk Lasso Sam's spy."
 "Ah! that was it, was it?"
 "Yes."
 "Do you know aught about his family?"
 "Well, yes, we were boys together."
 "And met out West here?"
 "Yes."
 "Why did you come West?"
 "I didn't dare stay East."
 "A good reason."
 "Yes."
 "What crime had you committed?"
 "I robbed the mails, for I was a mail rider."
 "And Thorny?"
 "Well he was a rich man's son, but got into debt, and he knew his father was to get a large lot of money by mail, so he told me to rob the bag and say I had been held up by men on the road."
 "And you did?"
 "Yes."
 "Well?"
 "I gave him the money and then told my story."
 "But they did not believe me and I was arrested, but Thorny got me away one night and I skipped."
 "A year ago I met him out West here and he told me he had run off because they accused him of poisoning his father to prevent him from changing his will."
 "Now you've got the whole story."
 "And Thorny is dead and you are a skulking thief, led to what you have become by him."
 "I feel sorry for you, Flip, and hope you

will lead a better life, for if not you will be hanged yet."
 "Now, what was Thorny's name?"
 "Roger Thornton?"
 "Where did he live?"
 "In West Virginia near Wheeling."
 "Now you can go."
 "I'll do it, and please don't send the Vigilantes after me."
 "I will not, only try and lead a different life."
 "I wants to, for the sake of my old mother."
 "Where is she?"
 "She moved away from the old home after I was disgraced, and went to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to live with my sister who married there."
 "What is your sister's name?"
 The man gave it without hesitation, and then Bonnie Belle said:
 "See here, Flip, will you make me a promise?"
 "Indeed I will."
 "I do not believe you are naturally bad."
 "You were led astray by the stronger, wicked spirit of Thorny, and you have led an evil life since."
 "But you can redeem yourself, and my advice to you is to go at once to your mother, confess all to her and have her help you to live a better life."
 "You have some money, and I will give you back this gold, if you will promise me to do this, while, after you have reached your mother, write me, and I will see that you get something to do."
 "Will you do this for me, Flip?"
 "Will I?"
 "God knows that I will."
 "You are the first one who has been kind to me for years—no, the miner Deadshot was good to me."
 "I was a boy when I robbed the mail, only sixteen years old, and that was eight years ago."
 "Oh, yes, miss, I'll go to my mother and be a good man, atoning for the past."
 "I know the good you have done in the mines, and that you run as square a game and saloon as gambling can be square."
 "I know that you have saved many a man's life, and that you are always doing some kind act and have helped many a man to become good, and go to his home again."
 "They call you the Beautiful Gambler, but I know, as others do, that you do only good and keep Pocket City from being a perfect hell."
 "God bless you, miss, God bless you," and the tears streamed down the eyes of the man.
 "Good-by, Flip, and remember your promise."
 "Here is your money, and I will expect a letter soon."
 The man could not speak, for his voice was choked up, but he bent his head low, holding his hat in his hand, as Bonnie Belle rode away back on the trail.

CHAPTER LV.

THE BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY.

It was growing twilight when Bonnie Belle drew near the miner's cabin.
 He had gone after his horse, fearing trouble with Flip, and was just starting in pursuit.
 "You found him?"
 "Oh, yes."
 "And got your money, I hope?"
 "Yes, but I gave it to him again."
 "Gave it to him?" asked the surprised miner.
 "Yes, I will tell you all about it."
 This she did, the miner listening with deepest interest as they rode along together.
 "Well, you think I have done wrong."
 "On the contrary, I think you have done just right."
 "I am glad to hear you say so."
 "I am glad to say so."
 "I wished to redeem him if I could."
 "You have, I am sure."
 "I know, too, of so many acts of kindness, of goodness upon your part, that I cannot reconcile those deeds with your life here, as the mistress of a border gambling den, drinking saloon and hotel."
 "Yes, I can understand that you cannot reconcile my actions here; but I have my reasons, and that is all I now can say."

"I am sure of one thing, that I dread evil too much ever to become contaminated by it, no matter how close the touch."
 "Our Eastern friends would never believe that I could be what I am and yet keep far above degradation, and yet I cannot believe that there is a miner in Gold Dust Valley, yes, even a desperado, who will cast a slur upon the life of Bonnie Belle, the mistress of the Devil's Den."
 "You are here for a purpose, Deadshot Dean, and so am I."
 "Now, let us drop the subject, when I say that as surely as you can keep good, so can I."
 "I believe you," was the fervent response of the miner.
 "These things which you took from that poor wretch, are the likeness of my parents in this locket, and of a brother whom I made the ideal of my girlhood life."
 "This bracelet he gave to me, and the ring was my mother's."
 "I have kept these treasures of the past apart from the jewelry I have purchased for myself, and had they been taken from me it would have broken my heart, I believe."
 "I owe much to you, Carroll Dean."
 "Ha! you know my name?" cried the miner, in greatest surprise.
 "You forget that I am postmistress of Pocket City," was the quiet reply.
 "Very true."
 "And that you are one of the few men out here in Yellow Dust Valley who is not afraid, or ashamed to be known by his name."
 "I believe that is also true."
 "But here you turn off to your home."
 "It is dark now, and I will see you to Pocket City."
 "No, you had better not."
 "But Hangman's Gulch you know is haunted?" he said, with a smile.
 "True, but I should like to see a ghost."
 "Then I must not go with you."
 "You must not go with me?"
 "I shall do as you say."
 "That is right."
 "But there is one thing more I wish to say to you."
 "Yes."
 "I warned you of Flip."
 "Yes."
 "I came to warn you against two others."
 "Well?"
 "They are more dangerous than he by far."
 "Do you mean Beaver Bill and Deadly Eye Dick?"
 "Yes."
 "You have already been warned by some one then?"
 "No, I was warned by them what I might expect."
 "They threatened you then?"
 "Not to my face; but they started out on my trail and lay in ambush for me."
 "They did do this?"
 "And yet you escaped."
 "You see that I am unharmed."
 "And they are two of the most desperate, dangerous men in the valley."
 "So I have heard."
 "How did you escape them, for I am curious to know?"
 "You will keep the secret?"
 "I will."
 "Those two men were the ones who saw the ghost of Hangman's Gulch?"
 "Yes."
 "I was the ghost."
 Bonnie Belle burst forth into ringing, rippling laughter.
 The miner was surprised and pleased.
 He had never heard her laugh before, and it was contagious.
 She had seen the men in their fright about the ghost, and recalled how funny it was when she knew just who the apparition was.
 "Well, I enjoyed that immensely, Mr. Dean."
 "But I must go on to the camps, for perhaps if I see a ghost, it might be a real one."
 "Come to The Frying Pan when you can."
 "Good-night."
 Away she dashed, leaving the miner seated upon his horse and gazing after her.
 "That woman is more and more a mystery to me."
 "She is a young girl, and yet a woman in experience."
 "What do her good acts mean, when, after

all, she is certainly allied in some way to the Will-o'-the-Wisps?

"There can be no doubt of that, after the meeting that I saw in Hangman's Gulch."

CHAPTER LVI.

A PAIR OF VILLAINS.

CROUCHING on the sides of the trail leading to Pocket City were the forms of two men.

Darkness had come on, and found them a short distance beyond Hangman's Gulch, going toward Deadshot Dean's cabin.

"I tell yer, Bill, I hates ter halt in this neighborhood."

"That's so, Pard Dick, but it hain't moonrise, yer know, and ghosts don't show up on dark nights."

"I hain't so certain o' that."

"But I s'pose we has ter risk it somehow."

"We has."

"Waal, ther gal went out this trail, and yer know she do always carry a pocketful o' money with her, not ter speak o' them diamond earrings, rings and bracelets she shines up with."

"Yer see a miner who had been a jeweler in Pittsburg told me that she had on all of twenty thousand worth o' diamonds."

"My Lord!"

"Thet is a fortin."

"Yes."

"And she has money?"

"She always carried a big roll of bills ter open the banks with at night in Devil's Den, and like as not she's got five thousand."

"Good!"

"She's gone on that miner I take it, and she's rid out this trail ter see him."

"Yes."

"So we kin kill two birds with one stone, as I told yer."

"Yes."

"I see no light in the miner's cabin, so he hain't home yet, for he's either in Pocket City, or off on a hunt."

"He hain't in Pocket City I be sart'in."

"Then he's off on a hunt fer game, so will be home soon."

"Yer means just ter tackle the gal?"

"Yes, we kin rope her in, git her diamonds and money, and tie her to a tree whar somebody kin find her in ther morning."

"And then?"

"Why we kin take her horse, go on to ther cabin, kill Deadshot and rob him."

"That's the way to talk."

"Yes."

"And then?"

"We can take his horse and the gal's, and by pushing 'em all night kin git a long start."

"I sees."

"We kin then turn ther critters loose, if they hain't died under us, and hoof it for a day, leaving no trail."

"So we kin."

"Then we can pick up two more horses at some o' ther camps, and make our way down to ther country south o' here, and have a nice lot o' money ter live on, when we sells ther diamonds."

"That's so."

"But yer don't think we'll run afoul o' ther ghost, does yer?"

"No."

"Well, we'll git as near ther Hangman's Gulch as we dares go, and wait."

They moved up nearer to the Hangman's Gulch then, halting at the very edge of the canyon.

They had not long to wait before they hearl the sounds of hoofs approaching.

"She's a comin'."

"Maybe it's ther miner."

"No, he don't ride ther fast."

"Let us git ready."

"I am."

"My lariat is ready too."

A moment more and Bonnie Belle came into view.

It was bright starlight, and as though she wished to test her courage by going slow by the Hangman's Gulch, she drew her horse down to a walk.

The next instant two lariats whirled out from among the rocks, the noose of one circling over the shoulders of the Beautiful Gambler, the other catching her horse about the neck.

"We has yer foul, Bonnie Belle, so don't yelp, fer it will do no good," cried Beaver Bill and he quickly grasped her by the hands

and drew her from the saddle, while Deadly Eye Dick made the horse secure.

"Now git that belt of arms from her, pard," Deadly Eye Dick obeyed.

"I know you now," said the young girl in the coolest manner possible—remarkably self-possessed for one in her situation.

"More than likely."

"You are Beaver Bill."

"I is, miss."

"And you are Deadly Eye Dick."

"Sart'in."

"You were going to murder Miner Deadshot Dean, but seeing me, concluded to hold me up and rob me."

"You is a mind reader, Bonnie Belle."

"Well, what is it you wish?"

"Them diamonds you wears, and your money."

"I will give you my money, yes, for I can not help it."

"And the diamonds too."

"Come, out with 'em, or we'll tear them out o' yer ears, and cut yer fingers off too but what we gets them rings."

"See, we means business and we has no time to lose."

"I am fairly caught, I see, so must obey, for then I suppose I can go on my way."

"No, we ties you to a tree for somebody ter find yer in the morning, and we gags yer too."

"Yes, and wants yer horse, for we is goin' traveling."

"You are two as unmitigated scoundrels as I ever met, and that is saying a great deal."

"Likely we is, Miss Sauce-jaws; but, we don't want any more palaver."

The poor girl had no thought that her call would be answered, for the cabin of the miner was a long way off, but as a bold bluff, she suddenly said:

"Well, now that I know your game I might as well stop your mischief."

"Ho, Deadshot Dean! here is game for you!"

"I am here," cried the voice of the miner from Hangman's Gulch, and before the startled gaze of the two cut-throats appeared the man they had so much cause to dread!

CHAPTER LVII.

BONNIE BELLE'S REQUEST.

AT the sudden voice of the miner, so close at hand, and coming from the Hangman's Gulch as he did, Bonnie Belle was as greatly surprised and startled as were the two desperadoes who held her a captive.

She uttered a cry of mingled delight and alarm, and leaped quickly away from them, while they, almost stunned by the coming of the miner, did not at first draw their weapons.

Their first thought seemed to be that a ghost had confronted them.

But a glance revealed to them the fine form of the miner, and that he was ready for action.

"Hands up, you devils, for I want you for the Vigilantes," cried the miner in a voice that was full of determination.

His allusion to the Vigilantes was suggestive of their fate did they surrender, and as they were two against one they suddenly came to their senses and determined to fight.

"Hands up yerself, Deadshot," cried Beaver Bill, and he drew his revolver.

Deadshot Dean could have fired sooner, but he did not appear to wish to do so even against odds, until pressed to fight.

As Deadly Eye Dick also drew his weapon it now became certain that it was going to be a duel to the death.

There was nothing then to do but to open fire, and this the two desperadoes did almost together.

All this had been but the work of a few seconds, so quickly had all acted; but with the flash of the two revolvers in the hands of the two robbers, the miner also opened fire.

It may have been the sudden shock to their nerves, finding their hopes dashed to the ground at the moment of their success, that caused the two men to lose their record as dead shots, but whatever the cause, one of them only sent a bullet through the miner's hat, while the other clipped his clothing.

Deadshot Dean, however, sustained his record and his name, for he fired but twice.

Those two shots were enough, and he seemed to understand as much, for he thrust his revolver back into his belt, and turned quickly toward Bonnie Belle, who had witnessed the whole scene with bated breath, for she dreaded that the hours of Deadshot Dean were numbered against two such men.

With her belt of arms in the possession of the two men, she could lend no help.

"I hope you were not harmed," said the miner, as he stepped toward her.

"Not in the least, but may they not be yet dangerous?"

"Oh, no, for I shot them both between the eyes."

The woman stepped quickly forward, and went over first to one, then the other of the two men.

"It is marvelous how you shoot."

"You well deserve your name," she said.

Then she added:

"They intended to rob me of my diamonds, my money and horse, after which it was their intention to tie and gag me, leaving me here, while they, after going to your cabin and killing you, made their escape."

"I called upon you for aid, without the slightest idea that you were near, and lo! here you appear as mysteriously as a ghost."

"My appearance is easily accounted for, as I decided that it would be well to see you safely past Hangman's Gulch."

"So I cut across on the ridge, descended to the gulch, and just as I believed you had gone by, heard your call."

"And what gratitude do I now owe you!"

"Do not speak of that, for by their halting you as they did, my life was doubtless spared."

"But now, may I assist you to your saddle, for you had better go on home and report what has occurred."

"I will remain by these bodies to keep the wolves off."

"It will be a lonely vigil for you."

"I do not mind it, thank you."

She turned and buckled on her belt of arms again, then leaped lightly into her saddle, for the miner led her horse up for her, and then said:

"You will come on with the men when they come after the bodies?"

"Yes, if you wish it."

"I do wish it."

"Can I do anything to serve you?"

"You."

"What is it?"

"There was a meeting of the miners this morning, and they turned over to me, or rather as all is in my possession, told me to take charge of the property and money of Thorny the gambler."

"Yes."

"It amounts to considerable, and I wish you to go over it with me."

"I will be glad to help you."

"Of course it is asking a great deal of you, who killed him, to look over his effects, but you are the only one I can trust in the matter."

"I will be glad to give you all the assistance within my power."

"I felt that you would."

"Now I shall write to get the address of Thorny's nearest kindred, for I wish to turn over to them his property, except a certain sum which shall go to those in the camps who need aid."

"As he won his money from the miners, it can go to the relief of those in hard luck."

"I will help you all I can, Bonnie Belle."

Away she dashed now and Deadshot Dean was left to his lonely vigil over the dead.

CHAPTER LVIII.

A RESPONSE TO THE REWARD OFFERED.

To return to the fort now, and how matters were progressing there might interest the reader.

Buffalo Bill and his scouts still remained upon the trail, camping there as the chief of scouts had said, in their endeavor to unravel the mystery attending the very remarkable disappearance of the Will-o'-the Wisps after having killed Ribbons and a passenger and robbed Austin Marvin.

At the fort Austin Marvin continued to grow in popularity with all.

Though he had at first shunned the ladies, after the ice was broken he appeared to be devoted to their society.

He was so general too in his attentions that not a single envious thought was entertained.

One day it was a ride with a fair young miss of fifteen, and the next day with an officer's wife, whether she were youthful, passed two score years, ugly or beautiful.

Those who had decided that Nina De Sutro's romance must end in her marrying her hero, had come to the conclusion that matters were not going to turn out as they anticipated, or else the pair were playing a very clever game to avoid gossip.

One afternoon Austin Marvin saw the stage come in, and as he went to the mail he received a large and bulky registered letter.

He took it to his rooms and opening it found a lot of paper only, with but a very few lines.

The back of the envelope had the stamp upon it of a banking house in New York, and what was written was simply:

"I do as requested, make a bulky looking letter and send it to you by registered mail."

With this letter in hand Austin Marvin went over to call upon Nina De Sutro.

"Will you take a ride with me this afternoon, and go prepared for the demand upon your purse which we spoke of?" he asked.

"Yes, I will go with you."

"Thank you."

"No thanks, please."

"The amount was fifteen hundred, I believe."

"Yes, no less."

"You have your letter?"

"Here it is."

"It came by registered mail."

She glanced at the envelope and the writing.

Then she said:

"Call for me in half an hour."

In that time he returned, mounted upon one of Lieutenant Turpin's horses.

They mounted and rode away from the fort together.

The ride was not a long one, for within an hour's time they returned.

After going to his quarters Austin Marvin went the rounds paying off his indebtedness contracted, such as borrowed money, the sutler's bill, commissary stores and for servant and rent of quarters.

"It was hard to have to pay out three hundred good dollars.

"I have been living too extravagantly, as I got all on credit," he muttered, looking at his money like one who made it the idol of his existence.

Had there been any one who doubted Austin Marvin's inability to pay, after the arrival of that registered letter they were free to confess that they had wronged him.

He had something to say about an Express package being due also, with clothes, boots, hats and other needed articles.

But it had been delayed.

That night as he sat in his quarters there came a knock at the door.

"Come in!"

The one who entered was Horseshoe Ned.

He carried in his hands a large bundle wrapped up in a blanket and securely bound.

"Can it be possible after all that my Express package has arrived?" said Marvin.

"No, sir, but I has a package which may or may not be fer you."

"I guess it's mine."

"Waal, we'll see."

"Yer told me ter offer a reward for yer luggage?"

"Yes," and Marvin moved about somewhat nervously.

"I spread it around at the stations that you would pay a big reward for your things, if the Will-o'-the-Wisps would return 'em."

"Yes, yes."

"Thet reward struck 'em."

"Struck who?"

"The Will-o'-the-Wisps."

"I do not understand you."

"Well, the man who got yer duds thought more of gittin' thet reward than he did of what he hed."

"Ah, you got my things then?"

"I won't say that, for seeing is believing, yer know, and this may be a put-up job."

"How so?"

"Ter git money."

"Well?"

"Yer told me thet they was worth five hundred ter you?"

"Well, yes."

"So I gave my word on it that it should be paid."

"Certainly."

"But where did you get them?"

"I'll tell yer."

"Do so, pray."

"I were coming along ther trail, and suddenly I see a man waitin' fer me, horseback."

"Says I to myself, says I:

"Horseshoe Ned, yer is a goner."

"Yer see, I know'd I had a valerale pack- age along in a registered letter, and I was scared."

"But he holds me up and says thet he hears ther gent who lost his duds t'other day was willin' ter give a reward fer 'em, and when I tells him he was right, he went behind some bushes and brings out this bundle, tied up as it is, and told me it was the duds."

CHAPTER LIX.

THE WRONG MAN.

"Now, you did not take the things without knowing what they were, did you?" said Austin Marvin angrily.

"I hain't no snoop ter look inter other folks' things, and I hain't no fool."

"Well, what did you do?"

"I told him I was good for the amount, and I would fetch 'em to you."

"If they was all right, I'd fetch him ther money and no questions asked, letting him meet me somewhar upon ther trail."

"If they wasn't all right, then I would fetch the bundle back ag'in."

"That was right and fair."

"I thought so."

"Well, I'll look over them at once."

"He told me to excuse not returning the trunk, as they had destroyed that, it being inconvenient to carry on horseback, and they having to move suddent."

"So he put 'em all in the blankets, and he sent jist what were there in ther trunk."

"I'll soon see."

With this Austin Marvin began to unroll the ropes bound about the blanket most securely.

It was well done up, and a very heavy bundle.

When opened there were a number of clothes removed, a shaving case silver-mounted, boots, shoes, hats, a shot-gun and accouterments, gold-headed cane, a case in which there was a watch, some jewelry and a case of handsome revolvers.

But altogether their value was not equal to five hundred dollars.

"Is they yours, sir?"

"Why certainly they are."

"And you will pay the reward?"

"Of course."

"When do you go back again?"

"Day after to-morrow sir."

"Well, come to me before you start and I will pay you the amount of the reward."

"I'll do it, pard."

With this Horseshoe Ned departed, leaving Austin Marvin in possession of his chattels.

It soon became noised about that the reward he had offered had gotten his things for him, and many dropped in to congratulate him.

Among them was Surgeon Powell.

"I think you were in luck, Marvin, and I congratulate you."

"Thanks."

"Of course there were a number of things missing, but I was glad to get what I have."

"See, here is a photograph album of friends who are near and dear to me."

"Who is this lovely woman?" asked the Surgeon Scout, referring to the photograph of a beautiful woman, the first in the book.

"That, I will tell you in confidence, is the lady whom I hope to marry some day."

"Indeed?"

"You are most fortunate."

"And this?"

"Is my sister."

"She is very handsome."

The Surgeon Scout glanced through the album with Marvin's permission, and was told who each one was that struck his fancy.

The next day there was a picnic down on the river, and Marvin enjoyed it immensely.

He gave out that he would soon have to leave the fort, and asked Clarice Carr if she would go riding with him the next day.

After a slight hesitation she consented,

and the engagement was made for the afternoon.

The next morning Horseshoe Ned called early, and received his five hundred dollars to give to the road-agent who had delivered over the luggage, and soon after he had started Austin Marvin came out with a most important letter, which he wished to go by that mail.

Springing upon his horse he rode rapidly after the coach.

It was all of ten miles before he overtook it, as he did not know the short cuts he might have taken.

Horseshoe Ned heard the clatter of hoofs behind him, and seeing who it was, halted the coach.

"I say, pard, I've been held up and robbed, and not seven miles from the fort," shouted the driver.

"Held up and robbed?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Yer see I seen a man waitin' fer me in ther road, and so I says to myself that he was ther one that come for ther reward."

"I draws rein and he says he wants ther money I had fer him."

"He was masked and muffled up, and wore glasses, so I couldn't see who he were, and I told him as I hed seen ther face of t'other man he must show up."

"Then he leveed his gun on me, and I hed just ter toss down thet five hundred roll of bills yer give me."

"This is a strange story to tell, Horseshoe Ned."

"See here, pard, don't yer go ter think I is playing a game ou yer, for I hain't ther one ter stand it, for I is poor, but I don't ask no favors of you nor anybody else."

"I've got money enough ter pay thet road-agent when I sees him, and I'll do it, so you hain't going ter be out of pocket not a cent, so I says you owes me an ask pardon."

"I do ask your pardon, Horseshoe Ned; but I have been imposed on so often I felt at first that you were doing the same."

"You will pardon me?"

"Cert, when yer come out like a man, and we'll shake when I gits back to the fort."

"Yer has a letter yer say ter mail?"

"Yes, here it is."

"I'll put her through for you, pard--so long," and Horseshoe Ned went on his way while Austin Marvin rode rapidly back to the fort.

CHAPTER LX.

A STARTLING DISAPPEARANCE.

THAT same afternoon, of the day when Horseshoe Ned was held up by the lone highwayman, Austin Marvin called for Clarice Carr to take her promised ride with him.

"Which way shall we go, Miss Carr?"

"Please yourself, Mr. Marvin."

"Then let us take quite a long gallop, going by this trail and coming back on the stage road."

"Very well, sir."

Clarice Carr was a most beautiful woman at all times, but especially in the saddle, and mounted upon her spirited horse Austin Marvin could not but greatly admire her.

"Do you not think we have gone far enough, Mr. Marvin?" she asked, when ten miles had been gone over.

"Yes, we will cross here to the other trail and return."

They rode on more slowly now, and just as they passed through a gap in a low range, found themselves confronted by two men, who stepped from the bushes upon either side and covered the man with their rifles.

"Turn and ride for your life!" cried Austin Marvin, to Clarice, and she half-wheeled her horse, expecting him to go with her.

But she stopped at once, for behind them were two other men, and they had their rifles leveled.

At the same instant a masked man rode out of the thicket and said:

"You are wise not to cause my men to kill you, sir."

"Resistance means death to you, while by submitting you will get off with paying a ransom."

"I have no money with me to pay a ransom either for this lady or myself."

"But permit her to go and keep me for a hostage."

"No, I shall keep you both."

"Do you mean to say that you will hold us until a ransom is paid?" indignantly asked Clarice Carr.

"It is just what I mean, lady."

"Who are you?"

"I am called Silk Lasso Sam, Miss Carr."

"You know me?"

"Oh, yes, as I do your escort, whom I robbed at Deep Dell Brook some time ago."

"You are rich and able to pay a ransom, and he is doubtless able also to pay well for his freedom."

Clarice Carr gazed more fixedly at the man now.

He was mounted on a fine sorrel horse, with the trappings of a Texas cowboy, the saddle being very handsomely ornamented and equipped.

At the saddle-bow hung a red lariat of woven silk, and a rifle was slung the other side.

The man was dressed in a stylish riding-suit of corduroys, boots and slouch hat and a crimson mask completely shielded his face, while gauntlet gloves were upon his hands.

"Keep me as a hostage I again say to you, and allow this lady to return to the fort, for I will give her the authority to draw what ransom you may demand for both of us, that is in reason."

"Oh, no, I will see to the ransom when I have you both safe."

"Miss Carr, I must pass a lariat about your waist and under the saddle so as to make you secure, also binding your hands, for you are to be blindfolded."

"Your escort I must make far more secure; but go with me you both must," said the bandit firmly.

"As Silk Lasso Sam you are capable of any act of rudeness," Clarice Carr remarked, while she added:

"I have no intention of making it worse for myself than it is by offering resistance."

"You are a very brave young lady," was the response of the horseman.

Then dismounting he approached Clarice with his red silken lasso in his hand, while he said:

"Now I must secure you."

He threw the lasso around her waist and drew it under the horse, after which he knotted her hands together with the two ends.

Taking a clean silk handkerchief from his pocket he bandaged her eyes securely, and remarked:

"Now you are safe."

In the meanwhile one of his men had disarmed Austin Marvin and bound him securely in his saddle.

His next act was to bind his hands and then blindfold him.

Then two of the men took the horses in lead, having led their own animals from the thicket, and they started off at a rapid pace, there being seven outlaws in the band.

As the shadows of night began to fall Mrs. Lester and her husband began to feel anxious about the long stay of Clarice and her escort.

Night coming on as they had not returned Major Lester and Captain Caruth, with half a dozen troopers, rode out on a search for them.

It was late when they returned, and they brought no tidings of the missing ones, but were sure they would find them at the fort upon their return.

Then there was the greatest alarm felt by all for the safety of Clarin and her escort, and Surgeon Powell, with all the scouts then in the fort, started off at midnight upon a thorough search.

Day dawned however and just then the surgeon and his scouts returned.

They had come for fresh horses and to take the trail of the two horses from the fort and thus track them; but the Surgeon Scout urged that a couple of troops should also go on the search and Colonel Dunwoody at once gave the order.

All was hushed at her coming, and her voice rung out clear as she said:

"My friends, I have to tell you of an outrage perpetrated this evening by two men of Yellow Dust Valley."

"I went out for a ride, and discovered that the man Flip had left the mines, and he attempted to take the life of Deadshot Dean, but failed."

"But he is far beyond pursuit now, so let him go."

"Two others then held me up on my return home, to rob me, and at Hangman's Gulch."

"Just as they were about to tie me to a tree, take my diamonds, money and horse, and then go and kill Deadshot Dean, I called for help, little dreaming that any help was near."

"It came in Deadshot Dean, and he shot those two men dead and rescued me."

"I left him guarding their bodies from the wolves at Hangman's Gulch, and there you will find them."

"The two men were Beaver Bill and Deadly Eye Dick."

A yell of rage went up as their names were spoken, and another of regret that they had been shot instead of hanged.

The crowd went *en masse* to the Hangman's Gulch, and there found the miner coolly awaiting them.

They heard the story from his lips, and the bodies were carried that night to Sunset Hill and buried in Angels' Row, for the miners felt that the greatest indignity they could heap upon them after death for their crime, was to bury them at night.

The next morning Deadshot Dean put in an appearance at The Frying Pan.

Bonnie Belle was looking unruffled by her adventure of the night before, and led the way to the room of Thorny the gambler.

There she left him, to look over the property left by the gambler.

At noon he came to her and said:

"I have gone over everything."

"The man was a burglar for he had the tools of one in his room, and had been a counterfeiter, for I found there some plates of bank-notes and a press."

"He had also been a forger for he had a book full of the copies of the signatures of rich men who are known in business circles."

"His property consisted of several boxes of jewelry and other valuables, which he must and could have only gotten from outlaws who had robbed people on the trails and from burglary."

"He was beyond doubt the go-between for the sale of those things for Silk Lasso Sam, sending them East for him for that purpose."

"I found several notes from Silk Lasso Sam to him, one giving a map of the trail of how to reach his retreat, should he have occasion to hunt him up for any special purpose."

"Ah!"

It was an exclamation from Bonnie Belle that was as though she was startled, and the miner saw her face turn deadly pale.

To see if his words had caused it he said:

"With this map of the trail I shall go to the retreat at once, and— But are you ill, Bonnie Bell?"

"No, and yes."

"Now hear me, Carrol Dean, for I will tell you my secret, one I had expected to keep hidden from all mortal eyes."

"You said yesterday that I called you by name, you remember?"

"I do."

"I excused my knowledge of your name by stating that I was Postmaster of Pocket City."

"Yes."

"But I knew without that of who you were."

"How so?"

"By recognizing you the moment I saw you."

"Then we have met before?"

"Oh, yes."

"I have felt all along that your face was familiar to me, though I could never place you, and supposed it was but a fancied resemblance."

"It is not."

"So I now believe, but still I cannot place the time when we met."

"It was years ago, when I was a mere girl of fifteen."

"I had black hair then, for I dyed it this color, auburn, to disguise myself as much as possible, and growing from girlhood to womanhood has changed me much."

"Still I cannot place you," said the puzzled miner.

"I will tell you then that I am Ruth Leigh."

"Great God!"

"The sister of Arden Leigh?" and the miner was greatly shocked.

"The sister of the man who so nearly took your life by shooting you down in the presence of your sweetheart, Kathleen Clyde, because she loved you and not him."

"He fled, and forged my father's name to a large sum to go away on, he believing that he had killed you."

"Father and I went to Europe, and there constantly we heard of debts which Arden had contracted and which father paid without a murmur."

"We returned to the United States after two years passed abroad, and went to California, on a ranch."

"There father died of a broken heart I may say, for he never recovered from the shock of my brother's evil deeds."

"He left me his fortune, and do you know what I did?"

"No."

"I determined to reform my wicked brother, and so I set out to find him, for he was the idol I had worshiped in my girlhood."

CHAPTER LXII.

THE MINER'S PLEDGE.

"You sought to reform your brother?" asked Carrol Dean, in a low tone of surprise.

"Yes, and I wished to do all the good I could, too, that I might atone for his evil deeds."

"First I had to find him."

"I had been in correspondence recently with him, for I wished to keep him from cutting wholly loose from us, and the last I heard from him he was in the Rocky Mountains, driving a stage he wrote me, after having been a wanderer in Southern lands."

"I did not wish to go as a woman, so I cut my hair off, dressed as a boy and set out upon my travels."

"The search was a long one, indeed."

"Brave, noble girl."

"I at last determined to continue the search as my natural self, and so returned to dresses, for as a woman I was respected even among the wildest of these bordermen."

"That is true."

"I was coming to the mines to search for my brother, when I met Mr. Lazarus in the coach, and he seemed interested in me."

"You remember we were attacked by outlaws, that Lazarus was fatally wounded, and dying, he left me his fortune, as he said he had no one else in the world to give it to, and I had been kind to him."

"But he made a confession to me, and that was of his being the ally of Silk Lasso Sam."

"The men who attacked us were Silk Lasso Sam's band, and the outlaw chief intended to rid himself of Lazarus, and did."

"But he told me more, and that was enough to cause me to believe, from all that he said, that my brother Arden was one of the outlaw band."

"I accepted the legacy of Landlord Lazarus, hoping thereby to find my brother."

"As I was supposed to keep up the place of ally, in the place of Lazarus, I met the agents sent here by Silk Lasso Sam, and at last became satisfied that Arden was not only with the band, but its chief."

"Ah! that is startling."

"By one of his couriers I wrote to the chief, telling him to meet me in Hangman's Gulch at a certain time and day."

"He did so, and I found that it was my brother Arden."

"Carrol Dean, I did not desert him then, but determined to save him if he could be rescued from his sin."

"I left him then, and he was to come on to Pocket City, and see me that night."

"That was the man who claimed to be Powder Face Pete's father?"

"It was."

"But how did you know?"

"I started for Pocket City by way of the gulch, and saw you talking to him there."

CHAPTER LXI.

BONNIE BELLE'S SECRET.

WHEN Bonnie Belle reached Pocket City she went at once to Devil's Den, where she knew she would find a crowd, and dressed in her riding habit as she was, her face flushed with excitement, she faced the crowded room.

"Oh! what did you not think of me?"

"I confess that I have supposed you were in league with the outlaws."

"But did you know him as an outlaw?"

"Yes."

"Powder Face Pete was one of his men, and knowing of his death, he claimed to be his father."

"Yes, and had men waiting for him up the trail and then went on to the northern trail and held up a coach, killing the driver and a passenger and wounding another."

"I know of this, and more, and that is why I confess all now to you."

"That night he was here I did all I could to humor him, hoping that I could persuade him to give up his life of crime."

"At his command I took up that contribution for him, you remember, but I have paid back in every way I could every dollar the miners put into that bat, for I found out from those I did not recall the amount they gave."

"Again I say that you are a noble woman, Ruth Leigh."

"Oh! do not call me by that name while I lead this life, for I know it is wrong, though I am guilty of wrong to save my brother."

"Here I am Bonnie Belle, the name that Landlord Lazarus gave me when he was dying, for he told me that it was the name of his daughter and she was dead."

"I will call you Bonnie Belle as before."

"That is right."

"But now let me tell you more."

"I know by a courier from my brother that he held up that stage, and what happened, and I learn now what he is doing, and I will no longer be a confederate in his deeds of deviltry."

"No, I have tried to save him, to redeem him, and in vain, and now I tell you that he must take the consequences of his evil life."

"I must not protect him, and more, I must betray him, for if I do not, many innocent ones will suffer by his acts."

"He sought your life and you know him as he is, and I tell you frankly, Carroll Dean, that you must be the one to put an end to his evil deeds."

"You must seek Buffalo Bill at once, and lead him and his scouts upon the retreat where you will surprise the band, after which you can capture Silk Lasso Sam, for I will no longer call him by the sacred name of brother."

"The horse you have is the one he rode here in disguise, and you have the map of the trail to his retreat, which you found in Thorne's room."

"Go there, and the horse will take you to it, I am sure, for he has been long in the band, my brother said, and because he was broken down was to be cast off."

"Now, will you do this, Carroll Dean, and stop this man's career of crime, only do not yourself be the one to end his wretched life?"

"I will, and at once, Bonnie Belle," was the firm response of Deadshot Dean.

"I pledge myself to the work."

CHAPTER LXII.

THE MINER TAKES THE TRAIL.

THAT very night, following his long interview with Bonnie Belle, and her confession, Deadshot Dean mounted his horse and took the trail to hunt down Silk Lasso Sam.

The outlaw's horse, with rest and food, was once more a fine animal, and carried him briskly along upon his way.

Deadshot's intention was to go at once to the fort, seek Buffalo Bill, and then decide what was best to be done,

He went by the same trail he had before taken, and to his surprise, just as he turned into the stage trail, in the spot where he had met Buffalo Bill before, he now beheld the scout.

They rode rapidly toward each other, and after a greeting, Buffalo Bill said:

"I have my men camping upon the outlaws' trail, Deadshot Dean, for they have had no chance to hold up the coach since the time I met you before, except that one man robbed Horseshoe Ned on his way out yesterday."

"I have made some discoveries of importance, since going upon the war-path after Silk Lasso Sam and his men, and I hope we will yet track them to their retreat, for it

is not far from Deep Dell Brook, I am certain— Ah! as I live, there comes Surgeon Powell, and he is riding rapidly, as though something had gone wrong!"

Soon after the Surgeon Scout dashed into view, there appeared far behind him a crowd of horsemen.

"Ho, Doc, glad to see you, but what has gone wrong?" cried Buffalo Bill as the Surgeon Scout rode up and halted.

He greeted both Buffalo Bill and Deadshot Dean warmly and said:

"The men of all men I wished to meet, for everything has gone wrong at the fort, as Miss Clarice Carr has been captured."

"Tell us just what has happened, doctor," said Buffalo Bill, his eyes flashing fire.

"If I wrong him, may Heaven forgive me, Bill, and I'll make every atonement in my power, but if that man Austin Marvin is not an outlaw in disguise I'll give up a year's pay to treat on."

"What have you new on him, Frank?"

"I'll tell you both, and in a few words."

"From the first I did not like him, as you know, for you were even more suspicious than I am."

"His story did not tally with the holes shot in the coach, the death of the outlaw and horses, and in other things he was all wrong."

"I watched him closely and grew so suspicious of him that I set a trap for him."

"And caught him."

"You shall hear."

"You know that he offered a reward for his baggage?"

"Yes."

"Well, I got together a lot of my clothing and traps, with some of Captain Caruth's and of several other officers, carried them wrapped in a blanket to the stage trail, and with a false beard and a wig on, along with a rough suit of clothes, I halted Horseshoe Ned on the trail, told him I had heard of the reward and gave him the bundle, on condition that he would give me the money."

"This he promised, and Ned took them to Marvin who claimed them as his and gave him the reward."

"Five hundred?"

"Yes."

"What a fool."

"Not so much a fool as you think, for he got up a rig, pretended to have an important letter to send and rode after the coach."

"He headed Ned off some miles away, held him up and robbed him of the five hundred."

"Can this be possible?"

"It is true."

"Then, taking off his mask, changing his rig and mounting his horse he rode on and overtook Ned, and gave him the letter."

"Yes, Horseshoe Ned told me of this."

"In the afternoon he went riding with Miss Carr and when night came they did not turn up."

"This morning I took their trail, and with your boys went to work."

"I saw that the same horse had gone and headed Ned off, then had overtaken him, and the same tracks I followed when later they had gone with the animal ridden by Miss Carr."

"They went to a canyon the trail crosses several miles back from here, and were there halted by a party of nine horsemen."

"What?"

"True as Gospel."

"Between here and the fort?"

"Yes, Bill."

"And then?"

"We took the trail and the men are following it yonder, while I came on to get you and your boys."

"I am with you heart and soul."

"And Captain Caruth is coming on behind with a couple of troops."

"We must catch those men now, doctor, or never show our faces at the fort again."

"The tracks circle toward Deep Dell Brook you see."

"Yes."

"Where are you encamped?"

"Beyond Deep Dell Brook a couple of miles, and the men are scattered from there on, while I patrol this side of it."

"Did you notice no trail this morning?"

"None."

"Yet they must have gone to the brook."

"They were compelled to do so, for they could go no other way; but they have gone by the lower ford."

"Then to the lower ford we go."

"One minute gentlemen," and Deadshot Dean took a paper from his pocket.

Glancing at it a moment he said:

"It would be far the longest way to go by the lower ford, so come with me on the regular trail, as soon as your men come up, for I will lead you to the retreat of Silk Lasso Sam and his men, for I came here for that purpose."

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE END OF THE WAR-PATH.

BOTH Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill looked at the miner in surprise, at his words, but he lost no time in saying:

"You were kind enough to make a detective of me, and with the aid of one whom I need not name, I have been able to track down Silk Lasso Sam, who, permit me to say, was once my friend, then my rival and would-be murderer."

"I have here a map which will aid me, and if at fault I will depend upon the horse I ride, for he was Silk Lasso Sam's own steed for a long while."

"Now call your men, Surgeon Powell, and we will start."

"They are your scouts, Cody, so you are leader, and I'll act as aide, with Deadshot Dean in the responsible place as guide."

The scouts now came up, and as the troopers were seen in the distance it was decided to send them by the lower ford, where all knew that the trail could not be followed owing to the nature of the ground, though it would be well to have them guard the brook, the miner said.

Captain Caruth was in command, and he and Major Lester, who had come along in anxiety for Clarice Carr's fate, were asked to go with the scouts, which they did, thus forming a force of fifteen men.

Deadshot Dean led the way, and when they went down into Deep Dell Brook all watched the guide attentively.

The horse he rode stopped to drink, then started down the stream.

He went toward the other shore, against a cliff, where a massive vine hung over the water.

This was pushed aside by the miner and an archway through the cliff was revealed.

In through this all passed, coming out into a rocky valley beyond where no iron-shod hoof would leave a trail.

From here on they went toward the Barren Hills, the place where the scouts had been thwarted before.

A courier was sent back to bring on the best mounted of the troopers, and as they reached the hills they came up with the horses foaming from their hard ride.

The miner's horse still led the way, though Deadshot Dean carried his map in his hands.

Across the creek where there appeared to be no ford, and thence on into a rocky canyon, which was not seen until right upon it, the miner led his followers, to come suddenly upon the camp of the outlaws, a dozen in number.

Upon them the scouts and soldiers charged so suddenly that they could not escape, even though beyond there was a pass to a fertile valley in the midst of the hills, which had been supposed to be utterly devoid of vegetation.

And in this valley were horses and cattle and the stolen booty of the outlaws.

There were a few shots from the outlaws, a rapid fire from the scouts, and in a couple of minutes of time the two-thirds of the band had been killed and the rest were prisoners.

"Where is your chief?" cried Buffalo Bill, looking around him, as he stood near Clarice Carr, who held Major Lester by the hand, while Captain Caruth was congratulating Austin Marvin upon his escape.

"There he stands, in the man you know as Austin Marvin," said Deadshot Dean, confronting the man he referred to.

A chorus of exclamations arose, while Austin Marvin sprung toward his accuser.

But Buffalo Bill threw himself between them, and grasped him by one arm, while Surgeon Powell seized him by the other.

"He spoke the truth, for this man who calls himself Austin Marvin is none other than Silk Lasso Sam, the outlaw chief."

"It was he who, with a couple of his men held up the coach, killing Ribbons and the

passenger, who shot one of the outlaws, and wounded the chief.

"He then plotted to boldly play the part of a passenger, dressed himself in the clothes of the dead man, and sent his baggage to his camp by his surviving companion and here you will find it."

"He shaved off his mustache and imperial, and you all know the rest, and how well he played his part."

"He sought to get a ransom for Miss Carr, and so arranged to have his men capture him with her, thus deceiving her into the belief that he was a prisoner too."

"Thus you all can see the bold game played by the man."

"You have no proof of these charges against me," cried the accused man.

"Here is my authority," and Buffalo Bill turned to the miner.

"And who are you?" asked the outlaw.

"One who was your boyhood friend, Arden Leigh, one whom you sought to kill, and who knows all of your vile life."

"If you have any shame in you do not force me to bring one other as a witness against you."

The man had staggered back as the miner faced him, and now cried hoarsely:

"You are Carrol Dean?"

"I am Carrol Dean, and did I seek revenge against you, Arden Leigh, bitterly would I be avenged in seeing you as I now do."

"But I have acted only to save others, and thank Heaven I have been enabled to do so."

"Buffalo Bill told me to take the war-path against you with him, and I am glad to feel that at last your career of crime is at an end," and turning upon his heel the miner walked quickly away, as though overwhelmed with the memories that crowded upon him from the past.

CHAPTER LXIV.

CONCLUSION.

BACK to the fort went the victorious party of scouts under Buffalo Bill, after having buried the dead outlaws.

They carried the chief and other prisoners with them, and the horses and cattle captured were driven by the scouts, the booty also being carried along.

Night came on before they reached the fort, but a courier had been sent ahead with the news of the capture of Silk Lasso Sam and his band, and the rescue of Clarice Carr.

The fort was ablaze in honor of the occasion and the guns gave a salute as the party marched into the stockade.

The miner of course went along, for no one would hear of his returning, as he wished to do, at once to Pocket City.

"You must meet the colonel," Buffalo Bill had said.

"You must go," urged Clarice, and that settled it.

Upon the arrival at the fort Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell escorted Carrol Dean to headquarters, and there Colonel Dunwoody heard the whole story of the pursuit and capture.

But Carrol Dean did not say one word to compromise Bonnie Bell, for he wished her name kept out of the whole affair.

Under the circumstances he declined to receive one dollar of the reward offered, telling Colonel Dunwoody to divide it among the scouts and soldiers who had been at the capture of the Will-o'-the-Wisps.

His pay for the services he had rendered he did accept, and the next day arranged to start back to Pocket City, for he knew how anxious Bonnie Belle would be to hear all.

One favor he asked of Colonel Dunwoody and that was that he might see the prisoner alone.

This was granted and for a long time he was with Arden Leigh, and at last left him with the pledge that he would die without saying aught to compromise his sister who had been so devoted to him through all, and urging her to go East with Carrol Dean and make her home with them.

"And one thing more," said the outlaw.

"Go and see Miss Nina De Sutro, and say to her this:

"Silk Lasso Sam says that you are to have no fear of his betraying you, for he has done evil enough to, in the end, be guilty of a kind deed when it is in his power."

"And keep the secret that I sent you to her, Carrol," added the outlaw.

"I will."

"And now good-by."

"A last good-by," and Silk Lasso Sam extended his hand, which the miner grasped.

When he left the prisoner he asked Buffalo Bill if he could arrange for him to see Miss De Sutro, as he had a message for her from an old friend.

"She is in that arbor on the bluffs, for I saw her go there a moment ago," said the scout.

Thither the miner hastened, and there he found the woman pale as death.

She started at seeing a stranger, but he said quickly:

"Pardon me, but I bear a message to you from Silk Lasso Sam."

Then he delivered the message and left her.

That day the miner bade farewell to his friends at the fort, and hardly had he been gone an hour when Buffalo Bill overtook him, riding rapidly.

"I came after you to say that the court of officers condemned Silk Lasso Sam and his men to die by hanging in just one month from to-day.

"So be it," was the reply of the miner, and after a short conversation with Buffalo Bill he again went on his way.

The next night he arrived at Pocket City, and for a long while he talked with Bonnie Belle, telling her all.

Then he added:

"Now you must go with me East, for I am going home."

"My claim is beginning to pan out far better, and so I wish to go home and see my loved ones, and you are to go with me, for Kathleen will be a sister to you, and I a brother."

"But will you look after my affairs here when you return, and close them up?"

"Yes, I will attend to anything for you."

"When will you start?"

"In just two weeks."

"I will be ready."

And Bonnie Belle kept her word, while the day they took the stage she got a letter bearing the post-mark of Gettysburg, Penn., upon it.

It was from Flip, and in it he told her he was at home with his mother, and she had forgiven all, while they were to go to the South soon where he was to go into business with his brother-in-law.

"He has been redeemed, and I shall devote my life henceforth to the reformation of the erring," said Bonnie Belle, handing the letter to Carrol Dean to read.

But, my kind reader, I will let the curtain fall now upon the characters and scenes of my story, for as you know, all's well that ends well, and that is the end of romance.

THE END.

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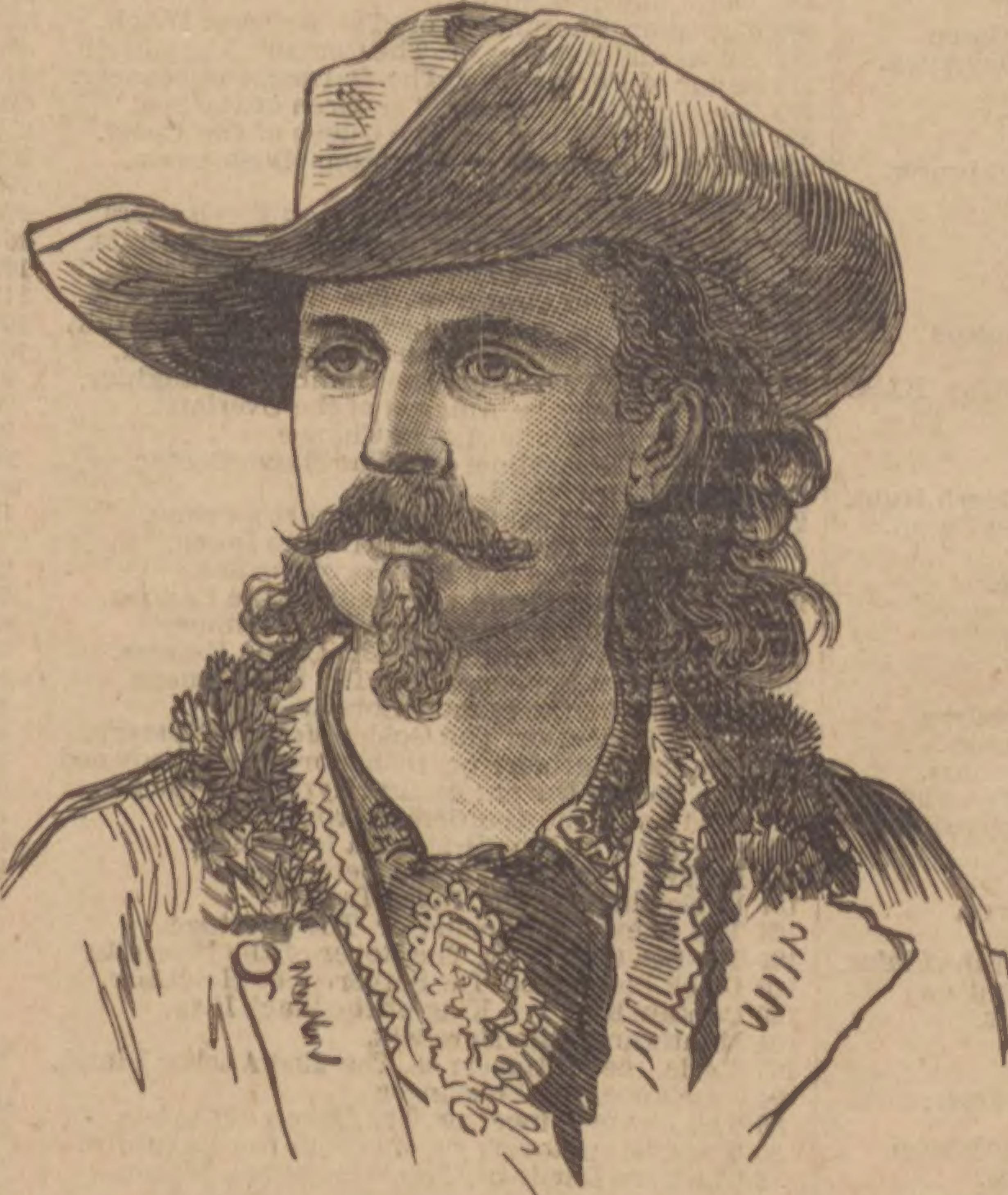
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